

**School of Design and Art**

**Imaging the Margins: Representation and Identity  
in Visual Art Reflections**

**Fatemeh Biglari Afshar**

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## Abstract

In this exegesis, the author examines the research and creative processes that went into producing several bodies of visual artwork during the period of her PhD candidature. It also includes a written and visual presentation of the works themselves. The author's aim in this exegesis then is both to discuss the main concerns that informed these works, or the problems she was seeking to respond to in making them (most of which have to do with issues of representation affecting marginal subjects—above all those of Islamic cultural background living in the West or in the shadow of its colonial history) and also the creative processes involved in making these works. The first series that is presented (titled ***In Between Spaces***) visually communicates the struggle of migrants (like the artist) to maintain a holistic cultural identity after migrating; and in the discussion supporting this work, the author examines various theoretical topics related to cultural and geographical displacement and the politics of representation that either informed the work or helped to solidify her reflections on its subject-matter. Similarly, the second and major body of work presented here (titled ***Under Western Eyes***) is intended as a visual response to a question about why the works of Muslim artists exhibited in the West tend to display a certain uniformity as regards their visual and thematic elements; and in the supporting analysis, the author examines the way in which codes of representation operating within and through the global art market are linked to the discursive construction of the Muslim “other” as inferior to the ideal Western subject. In the final main chapter, the author discusses a third major body of work (titled ***In the Exodus, I love you more***) that she produced during her candidature. As the author explains, this work emerged in part in response to the limitations that she came to see in the approaches of the former works (or the way in which they sought to communicate specific social and political struggles), and represents the artist's return to a more personal and documentary style of image-making. Thus, in addition to communicating specific knowledge about images and representation, both the produced work and supporting analyses presented here are intended as examples of contemporary research-based creative practice responding to current political and theoretical issues.

## Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

Date: 19/11/2019

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Summary and aims of this exegesis

The purpose of this exegesis is to present an extended discussion and analysis supporting the creative arts research and studio experimentation that went into making several bodies of creative work during my PhD candidature in the Art department at Curtin University from 2010-2016, as well as a written and visual presentation of the works themselves. More specifically, my aim here is to examine and discuss the main concerns that informed these works, including the issues that I was seeking to respond to in making them, and the visual strategies that I developed during the various stages of my creative arts research.

## 1.2 Research question and aims

The main research question that I have sought to address through my creative arts research is: How do problems of identity and representation shape the experience of migrants of non-Western background living in the West, and what visual-art strategies can be used in order to best communicate and respond to these problems and experiences? In exploring this question I engaged both in extensive scholarly research, focusing on the field of postcolonial theory, and also studio research that involved extensive experimentation alongside engagement with art works produced within a similar visual art context. In doing so, my creative arts research aims first of all to provide concrete knowledge about the experience of migration and related issues to do with cultural representation, and second, to present and evaluate specific visual strategies and artworks that the present researcher developed as a means of exploring these problems within her specific historical and visual-arts context.

## 1.3 The main stages and themes of my creative arts research

As described in the previous section, the main concerns that I have sought to explore through my creative arts research since commencing my doctoral studies at Curtin University have to do with issues of representation that affect minor or othered subjects (particularly individuals of non-Western and Islamic cultural background, such as myself, who are living in the West). More generally, I am interested in larger questions about the representations of these subjects—wherever they happen to live—produced in the West, and how these representations are supported by, and in turn support, discourses of power. I have also been concerned with

investigating possible strategies of challenging these systems of representation in general and in the particular context of my image-making. In this respect, my creative arts research falls partially, though not exclusively, within the domain of post-colonial criticism; and as I shall discuss below, I have been strongly influenced by authors such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Hamid Dabashi, and others, whose work is concerned not only with critiquing colonial discourses, but also with interrogating how the latter type of discourses are strongly linked to the (re)production of images and visual representations in art, literature, and other cultural products.

As such, I am particularly interested in investigating the intersection between this latter concern and the situation of non-Western/Muslim artists—especially Iranian artists—such as myself, who are either living in the West and/or engaged in making visual-art works for a Western audience. And my interest here concerns both (1) how the content of such artists' works reflects, in different ways, their personal experiences of being subjected to, or affected by, the abovementioned discourses; and (2) how the reception and reading of such artists' works in the West interact with, or are supported by and in turn support, these discourses. In slightly different terms, I am interested in how the production and consumption of these works forms a kind of circuit (not a closed circuit, but nevertheless one that is strongly bounded by a system of knowledge and power, in a Foucauldian sense) in which the signs of cultural difference contained in them tend to confirm certain meanings or values linked to the sort of discourses mentioned just now—all of which imply, in some way, the superiority of the ideal Western viewer vis-à-vis the non-Western subject, no matter how an artist has intended to employ them.

It should be noted too that this dominant concern within my creative arts research emerged gradually; and the specific direction and shape of my developing interests and their interconnection is reflected in the sequence and content of my studio research and the resulting creative works (which are presented here in the chronological order of their development).

Initially, for example, my creative arts research was more focused on themes related to the experience of migration and displacement, especially as it affects migrants of non-Western background, and how this experience is often imagined and communicated visually in the works of non-Western artists. And through my studio practice I also set out to communicate some of my own experiences, often in dialogue with, or by responding to, other visual artists' work dealing with similar themes. Here especially the question that I began thinking about had to do with interrogating the roots of sadness or nostalgia—literally, the pain of (not) returning home—that is often associated with the experience of migration, and many other related issues (having to do with the experience of racism, cultural displacement, and loss of identity) that so

often emerge as thematic concerns in the work of migrant artists. And the more I investigated these experiences and themes and their visual encoding in the works of such artists, the more I came to see them as bound up with the sort of larger questions about representation mentioned above.

So the second and, in a way, more substantial phase of my creative arts research involved a turn towards investigating the nexus between (visual) representations and various dimensions of social and political power operating within the West—and often operating through different metropolitan centres of the global art market, as I shall clarify below—in connection with the production and consumption of different artworks of non-Western artists whose thematic content is encoded or communicated in a particular way: above all when they employ familiar signifiers of cultural difference or otherness (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 5). Here, then, my focus shifted more or less to the logic of the art market, and towards an interrogation of the way in which the entry of these artists, or their artworks, into this field of cultural production and consumption, and their interactions with the ideological, economic and other mechanisms that lie beneath the market, leads to a situation in which they end up reproducing the very power structures that these artists (through their artworks) often seek to oppose. And so the main development that occurred in my creative arts research at this stage involved formulating strategies of opposition or critique aimed at highlighting and responding to this situation—strategies that I would pursue through the vehicle of my image-making.

In summary, then, the first phase of my creative arts research was primarily concerned with the experience of migration or displacement, particularly as it affects individuals of non-Western and Islamic background, while the second phase was concerned with broader issues of representation affecting such subjects, including the way in which the production and consumption of visual works produced by artists of non-Western background—and above all Iranian artists such as myself—both reflect and support a system of power that has its roots in earlier colonial discourses. At each stage, I produced a major body of work that sought to respond to or communicate these concerns in some way.

After reflecting on the success of the artworks produced during the earlier stages of my creative arts research (described above), I came to view both their intended aims and the visual means of communicating those aims as limited in certain respects. This led to a further stage in my creative arts research that involved me returning to a more personal and documentary style of image-making that eschewed the elements of ‘postmodern’ parody that were present in the former works.

In the following section, I briefly discuss each series of artwork produced during these stages of my creative arts research before describing the structure and content of this exegesis.

## 1.4 Creative works produced

During my candidature I produced three major bodies of visual artwork as outcomes of my creative arts research. These are:

- *In-Between Spaces* (2011)
- *Under Western Eyes* (2014)
- *In the Exodus, I love you more* (2014-2016)

I provide a summary of each of these series of works in the following sections.

(Another minor work, *After the Motherland* (2015), also grew out of *Under Western Eyes*, and attempts to communicate similar themes, albeit in a different visual manner. I shall discuss it briefly alongside the latter work.)

### 1.4.1 *In-Between Spaces* (2011)

*In-Between Spaces* is a series of staged colour photographs which is intended to communicate an aspect of the struggle associated with the experience of migration common to many non-Western migrants to the West: namely, the tension that arises through her attempt to maintain her own cultural practices and identity while living in diaspora—a way of recreating a sense of home in exile—while also adopting elements of the new local culture, such as performing the local national rites and so on, both as a way of concealing her original identity, and as a way of signaling her acceptance of the local culture and its norms: often as a shield to protect herself against racism or other forms of cultural prejudice. Again, both of these strategies are meant to overcome different aspects of the sense of loss and pain associated with her dislocation; however, the outward tension between these two different forces or movements arguably results in a further difficulty, insofar as the migrant comes to experience her-self and identity as split, or fragmented—pulled in opposing directions. Moreover, her tendency to often cling to the most visible or, perhaps, superficial aspects of each culture through a kind of essentialism (such as identifying with each culture through its most potent and easily-recognisable symbols) arguably only increases her dislocation through an additional sense of absurdity—of living a strange, hybrid existence.

The series *In-Between Spaces* aims to communicate what it is like to inhabit such a reality by presenting a series of self-contained scenes of several Iranian couples trying to fit in in their new home in urban Australia whilst preserving a sense of their original Persian heritage. (Each image is a staged photograph shot indoors or outdoors using a flash to increase the “surface” appearance of each scenario.) By employing humour and parody, and a visual language inspired by Persian miniatures, the images are meant to capture the absurdity, and almost tragi-comic nature of this situation. The figures in the images appear like frozen statues, or sad and curious puppets from another time: parodies of themselves. Their selves and identities having been reduced to the most superficial aspects of their hybrid cultural belonging, each wears a look of ennui, or forlorn boredom on their faces.

Partly autobiographical—inspired by my experiences as an Iranian woman and a young adult who migrated to Western Australia—*In-Between Spaces* also provokes questions about, and seeks to critique, aspects of nationalism, racism, and the politics of representation. This includes a sardonic critique of the dynamics of an institutionalised multiculturalism operating within the cosmopolitan centers of the West, including an art-market that tends to promote the works of culturally othered artists that highlight aspects of their cultural differences through their artworks. This latter theme is one that I pursued more directly in my second major creative project.

#### 1.4.2 *Under Western Eyes* (2014)

*Under Western Eyes* comprises a series of manipulated studio photographs that employ a commodified/commercial language of pop-art, and a combination of exaggerated signifiers of Islamic identity alongside symbols of Western fashion in order to challenge the dominant representations of the female Muslim subject circulating in the West, while also interrogating the way in which artworks that reproduce them function within this system of representation. Through pastiche and self-conscious redeployment of these familiar signifiers of female Muslim identity, I have attempted to reveal the origins of such representations, and the reason for the popularity of art works that display them, in the desires and assumptions of the West. That is, these images are meant to critique through “mirroring back” a certain audience expectation and desire in relation to how the female Muslim subject, or cultural difference more generally, is made visible in the works of Middle Eastern artists. It is this expectation and desire, for example, that explains the constant recurrence of several visual and signifying elements in the works of Iranian artists of the last several decades: above all the veil. For such symbols not only serve to easily identify this subject; they also position her in relatively fixed ways vis-à-vis the ideal type



of Western viewer—as poor, oppressed, tradition-bound, and thus inferior, but secretly—that is, beneath her veil—fashion-loving, rebellious, and sexually-free.

The central idea here, then, is that the self-representations of non-Western subjects in many non-Western artists' work often depend on, and as such re-produce, familiar signs of otherness that cater to the global-Western art markets' demand for artworks of marginal artists that highlight their own cultural difference in safe and predictable ways. This means that decolonising strategies of resistance or efforts to re-assert a marginalised identity through visual art practices can themselves become complicit in, and reinforce the same processes that produced the non-Western subject's marginal position to begin with, since such an artist quickly discovers that she can achieve commercial success through deploying visual and signifying elements in her artwork that affirm the image of the non-Western subject as other. Thus, the hyperreal and commodity-like nature of the images in this series is not only meant to underscore the simulacral nature of these sort of representations, but also the way in which they circulate as ideological images within the global art market today.

The title of the series is also intended as a reference to the famous article of Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1984). In this article, Mohanty advances a crucial argument about the relationship between First and Third World feminisms, specifically critiquing the project of Western feminism which discursively construct Third World women as a homogenous group of "victims" whom Western feminists must save. My series aims to communicate a similar idea—namely that the tendency in the West to preference art from the Middle East that depicts flat and stereotyped images of the veiled female subject reflects an attitude of sympathy and superiority towards Muslim.

This also became the central idea of another minor work that I produced after *Under Western Eyes*.

#### 1.4.3 *After the Motherland* (2015)

Drawing on the same ideas and research that went into making *Under Western Eyes*, my shorter series *After the Motherland* is intended as a critique of the attitude of First World feminists towards Muslim women, or the notion that the latter group are all uniformly oppressed and waiting to be rescued. Inspired by a personal encounter, the images are also intended to mock the idea (encouraged by some Western feminists) that simply by getting naked, the oppressed Muslim woman will become free. Furthermore, both the title and images in this series are directly inspired by, and intended to reference, the famous painting by the French artist

William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Alma Parens*, or *The Motherland*, which allegorically depicts the French empire as a naked-breasted Mother who feeds her dependent colonial offspring. In this way, by drawing together several of the main threads of my earlier research—in particular Chandra Monhanty’s thesis in *Under Western Eyes* about the discursive relationship enacted between First World feminists and Third World women—the series seeks to connect elements of Western feminism to earlier colonial discourses.

#### 1.4.4 *In the Exodus, I love you more* (2016)

Between 2014-2016, during several trips home to Iran, I took a large number of photographs on medium format camera in various locations around the country, which became the basis of an ongoing documentary photo series that I first exhibited in 2016: *In the Exodus, I love you more*. The series explores my changing relationship to, and vision of, my country of birth, Iran, in the light of my experience of departure and return. Though notably different in its style and approach, this series nevertheless grew out of my reflections on various subjects explored in the other works presented here. In particular, the series represents my first attempt since migrating to Australia to make a work about Iran and, in part, about being Iranian, but not from the same perspective that I explored in the previous series. That is, the work is not no longer concerned with (ironically) challenging audience perceptions or expectations that are tied to the politics of representation; and in general, the work has a strong personal focus, while still aiming to present a multifaceted picture of modern Iran, albeit through the lens of my own experience. As such, *In the Exodus* is relevant to a wider question that the critical investigation presented in this exegesis raises: namely, about what image-making approaches an artist in my position might pursue in seeking to “speak across borders”, whilst navigating the complex issues of representation that I have presented here.

### 1.5 Chapter summaries

The general content and structure of this exegesis is as follows:

1. **Introduction**—In this chapter I summarise the aims and content of this exegesis.
2. **The Experience of Migration**—In this chapter I outline the first main theoretical component of my creative arts research. I examine issues to do with the experience of migration and exile and the ways in which “home” is constructed in and through the diasporic imagination.

3. **Representation and Resistance**—In this chapter, I outline the second main theoretical component of my creative arts research. Here I focus on the ways in which colonial discourses have shaped the politics of representation operating in the West. I also explore issues to do with identity and representation and some of the ways that post-colonial artists have attempted to respond to these issues through their visual practice.
4. ***In-Between Spaces* (2011)**—In this chapter, I briefly analyse the first series of work that I produced in response to the research and themes outlined in the previous two chapters. The series *In-Between Spaces* reflects my experiences as a non-Western immigrant to Australia and explores issues to do with displacement, racism, cultural practices and nostalgia.
5. **Marketing the Margins**—In this chapter I outline the third main theoretical component of my creative arts research and the central questions that have informed one of the most significant bodies of work that I have produced during my candidature. I examine the ways in which the ideological mechanisms of representation operating in the West intersect with patterns of production and consumption in the global-art scene leading to the commodification of marginality and difference under the signs of post-colonial exoticism.
6. ***Under Western Eyes* (2014)**—In this chapter I analyse this second and main body of work that I produced as part of my creative arts research, which deals with the politics of representation in the West, above all in relation to the circulation of images of the female Muslim subject in contemporary art from the Middle East.
7. ***In the Exodus, I love you more* (2014-2016)**—In this chapter, I introduce the third major body of work that I completed during the period of my creative arts research: an expanded documentary series in which I explore my changing relationship to my homeland, Iran, in the light of my experience of migration. In this chapter I also describe how this series (which is notably different to the preceding works in its style and approach) took shape in response to my reflections on the approach and success of the preceding works.

## 2 THE EXPERIENCE OF MIGRATION

### 2.1 Introduction

Critical to my creative arts research is the recognition that a large number of artworks produced by emigrated artists of non-Western background share a similar thematic concern. On the one hand, we find that such artworks are very often centred on the visualisation of poetic narratives of a painful journey: they set out to depict the sense of loss or pain—literally, the “nostalgia”<sup>1</sup>—associated with being displaced or separated from one’s homeland. On the other hand, we find such artists often, and often at the same time, engaged in exploring issues related to identity, or loss of identity, as well as questions to do with cultural memory or practices and their attempted rehabilitation or reconstruction “in exile”.

Obviously these two themes overlap and relate to one another, for it is very often the feeling or experience of being displaced that provokes such searching questions. But while such experiences may be common to anyone who experiences migration or geographical and cultural displacement, they are particularly acute for émigrés from the Third World or of non-Western background. For these individuals migration is often more akin to exile, even when their journey is undertaken voluntarily—not (or not necessarily) because they have been forcibly cast out as the term exile suggests, but rather because of the often hostile or unwelcoming environment in which they find themselves. Their displacement, in other words, is often related to a loss of position, a feeling of inferiority. Similarly, the sense of loss of self or identity, whether individual or collective, experienced by many non-Western émigrés is related to their experience of what W.E.B. Du Bois (1997 [1903], p. 38) has called “double consciousness”: the sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of a dominant “other”<sup>2</sup> or through the prism of the dominant values that describe the new society in which one finds oneself—a feeling of “two-ness” that gives rise to an inner conflict.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Originally a medical term (from the roots *nostos*, “to return home”, and *algos*, “pain”) by a Swiss medical student in 1688. At first the medical diagnosis referred to a (curable) physical or pathological condition associated with exile. But increasingly the term came to be associated with a psychical condition as well as a shift in locus from a spatial to a temporal meaning. That is: the pain of nostalgia has come to refer above all to a desire to return not to a *place* but rather to the *past*. But the past of course is irrecoverable—it cannot be returned to—and the sadness of nostalgia is a response to this fact. As many writers have pointed out, this difficult looking-backwards—a dissatisfied return to the past—is related to the postmodern condition itself. See Hutcheon (2000). This will be relevant in the following chapter.

<sup>2</sup> On the meaning of “other” (and related terms) see Chapter 3.4 below.

<sup>3</sup> As Du Bois writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and

In this and the following chapter, my aim is to examine these issues in light of the legacies of Western imperialism and the experience of modernity more generally. Drawing on relevant aspects of postcolonial theory, I point to the role of European colonisation in both the movement of many formerly colonised peoples around the globe and the disintegration of their local cultures, as well as the discursive construction of various colonised subjects as marginal “others”.

But to begin with, it will be useful to reflect on the categories of migration and exile themselves and insofar as they relate to human creative experience generally in order to see more clearly how they relate to the experiences of displaced non-Western artists in particular. I will also focus on the category and experience of “diaspora” since this term points not only to the experience of migration but also to the attempt to maintain or reconfigure cultural ties and practices in a new and geographically removed environment.

This discussion will form the backdrop of an analysis of the first major series that I produced as part of my creative arts research and which responds to some of the themes described above concerning migration and cultural displacement (examined in Chapter 4).

## 2.2 Migration: Modernity and Exile

Human migration—the experience of being uprooted, exiled, or moving from place to place, whether in search of refuge or opportunities or simply new “horizons”—is not a new phenomenon, and so neither is the experience of cultural and geographical displacement. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that exile and displacement are somehow characteristic of the modern period, especially the last century, and even inscribed in the nature and experience of modernity itself as a cultural phenomenon.

On the one hand, so-called “economic” migration has increased dramatically in recent decades because of globalisation and the demand for workers with specific skills needed to support national economies. Increasingly, too, resource shortages and the effects of climate change are leading greater numbers of people to seek refuge in other countries. But these latest manifestations of the dynamic and destructive potential of modern capitalism only confirm that our age “is indeed”, as Edward Said notes, “the age of the refugee, the displaced person, [and] mass immigration” (2000, p. 174): an age that has been characterised by imperialism, totalitarian rulers, and more and more regional and global conflicts whose effects have been exacerbated by

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pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1997 [1903], p. 38).

the destructiveness of modern warfare. It is not simply the scale of displacement that characterises the modern era, but also the fact that the roots of displacement we see today are characteristically “modern”.

This point is significant because as many thinkers of the last century have noted the cultural and epistemological shifts linked to modernity have produced their own alienating effects. “We have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period itself as spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement”, Edward Said notes (2000, p. 173). Arguably this process began with the Enlightenment itself and its attack on classical politics and religion: the questioning or rejection of tradition. In the field of philosophy, and later psychology, the re-examination of human nature and reason eventually gave rise to a “loss of certainty” and doubts about the autonomy of the human subject, culminating in the critiques of Nietzsche and Freud, while in sociology and economics Marx described the estrangement of the self in class-stratified societies and the alienation of workers from their labour owing to the capitalist mode of production (Delanty, 2007). Likewise in the arts the modernist obsession with “the new” finally culminated in the postmodernist retreat into the hyperreal past and deconstructionism: a loss of historicity that has produced its own destabilising effects (a theme that I will return to in the following chapter).

On almost every front then, the resident of “today” finds herself strangely unsettled, uprooted, and facing a future without safe borders.

A surprising many philosophers have not only echoed this idea in recent decades, but actually embraced it too: not fatalistically, but with a sort of enthusiasm. Martin Heidegger, for example, famously recorded that “Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world” (1998, p. 258). Giorgio Agamben too has followed Hannah Arendt in describing the refugee as “the paradigm of a new historical consciousness” (1995, p. 114)—a new type of emancipated citizen who occupies “a future beyond the nation-state and its destructive exclusion of non-citizens” (Demos: np). Even Said cautiously observed that exile is “a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture” (2000, p. 173).

For these thinkers (and many others too) exile or homelessness becomes a potentially privileged state of being. But why?

It will be important not to lose sight of the concrete historical, political, physical and emotional senses of, as well as the important differences between categories like migration, displacement, exile, and refugee; similarly, we must acknowledge that even in its epistemological dimensions, the decentring and alienating effects of modernity are perhaps felt most keenly by (post)colonial

subjects, not only because they are often experienced in addition to geographical and cultural displacement, but also because their alienation is a product of their systematic othering through colonial representations; nevertheless, it is worth exploring briefly the creative possibilities contained in the experience of exile as these thinkers have described.

In his *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said notes:

While it perhaps seems peculiar to speak of the pleasures of exile, there are some positive things to be said for a few of its conditions. Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*. (2000, p. 186)

A similar view has been echoed by many postcolonial theorists and cultural critics in recent decades in an attempt to rethink the marginal position of the postcolonial subject as well. That is, rather than simply being a site of oppression and social exclusion, marginality is positively revalued as a (potentially) privileged mode of being and as a site of resistance against hegemonic discourses. Similar to the experience of hybridity,<sup>4</sup> what nourishes this position is precisely the “plurality of vision” that Said speaks about.

Like the experience of exile or cultural and geographical displacement, living at the margins develops a particular way of seeing the world, ‘from the outside in and the inside out’ in the words of bell hooks (1990, p. 341). Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha speaks about the “double frame” that—as Demos (2009, n.p.) summarises—“results from the bi-cultural knowledge” produced by the experience of exile: “a sensitivity towards difference (that of cultures, places and communities), and a newfound appreciation of the cultural character of one’s origins when looking back from exile’s awry vantage”.

Again, though, while this originality or plurality of vision—the “awareness of simultaneous dimensions” referred to in Said’s words above—may apply to all of those who experience exile or displacement, insofar as it applies to the “marginal” postcolonial subject it is important to point out that this vision relates especially to the experience and awareness of the operation of power. It is in this sense that bell hooks writes about the positive aspects of marginality, insofar as this positioning “offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives and new worlds” (1990, p. 341).

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<sup>4</sup> Referring to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 108)

I will return to the subject of marginality below, but for the moment we should keep this crucial point in mind, namely that this positive reevaluation of marginality refers solely to its potential “as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse” (1990, p. 341): a potentiality that exists because of the particular way of seeing reality from the margins in opposition to the center. That is to say, following bell hooks (1990, p. 341), we must distinguish between “a marginality that one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender” and marginality as “a site one clings to, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist”. To blur this distinction would be to trivialise the lived experience of being on the margin.

I mention this point because it applies too in a way to the experience of displacement and exile. That is, despite giving rise potentially to the sort of creative and original vision that has always nourished literary and artistic production, that experience itself is usually felt as loss and often terrible suffering. Once again Edward Said reminds us of this point in the opening lines of his *Reflections on Exile*:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. (2000, p. 173)

Today especially we should be wary of making exile serve notions of humanism Said warns us. Here he is speaking in reference to the literature about exile, but no doubt it applies equally to any of its aesthetic negotiations:

...at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience at first hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as “good for us.” (2000, p. 174)

To anticipate a point that will become the focus of Chapter 3, we should note as well another danger that (self-described) “exiled” political artists such as Shirin Neshat face. Speaking about the artist, Hamid Dabashi (2015) has noted:

The metaphor of exile, to which Neshat has been fatally attracted, is a double-edged sword. It may make for a commercially profitable market of self-victimisation that in the age of women’s rights being abused at the service of imperial warfare can in fact cater to lucrative markets.

Dabashi has avidly defended Shirin Neshat against claims that she has encouraged this positioning of her work herself (see Dabashi 2005). But however assiduously an artist may try to avoid such commercial exploitation, it remains an unfortunate fact that the global art market is



obsessively drawn to works that speak to themes like marginality and exile precisely because of their marketability. An awareness of this fact too has led many artists less scrupulous than Shirin Neshat to claim such a position for themselves—emigrated artists who (consciously or not) highlight the sorrow of their separation simply to be seen.

It is for this reason that we need to be careful about using categories such as exile, displacement, migration and so on when presenting our own work or critically examining that of others. All travel involving separation may be accompanied by the experience of pain, but these experiences and their causes are different in kind and severity: they exist on a continuum that is ruptured. I mention this point once again in order to carefully locate the artworks I want to discuss and the experiences that inform them—including my own.

For the most part, in this chapter, I am concerned with the experiences of Third World and non-Western individuals who struggle with issues of identity and maintaining cultural ties and practices in diaspora. Such individuals experience what we might call a “dual-ontology”—a kind of doubling or split in their experience of themselves and the world—and it is this aspect of living in diaspora that I want to examine and which has informed the artworks that I have produced.

## 2.3 Migration and the Past

The experience of moving from one country to another and being separated from one’s native homeland is something that colours all migrants’ experience of the present with a deep sense of loss—a homesickness—and a persistent desire to return home.<sup>5</sup> However, not all migrations are associated with such longing or pain equally. Above all, it is when a migrant’s relationship to her homeland, culture, language and history is forcefully interrupted and she finds herself in a culturally alien environment that these feelings are provoked. For such persons, it is not simply the experience of movement that is painful—the wandering away from the centre that is her home—but rather the fact that this movement involves a rupture (or several ruptures): the ties

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<sup>5</sup> According to Freud, homesickness, or the desire to return home, is like a longing for a return to the womb of the “motherland”. But while returning to the mother’s womb is a structurally unrealisable, or impossible act, “the lost homeland is potentially recoverable [...] and it is this potentiality—however imaginary—that drives the exiles’ desire to return” (Naficy, 1991, pp. 285–6). But living in a foreign land, estranged, the homesick subject is also haunted by a permanent sense of loss which constantly urges her to look back, even at the risk of “being muted into pillars of salt” (a term borrowed from Salman Rushdie’s essay: *Imaginary Homelands* (1991)). It is used in reference to people who too often look back on their past or certain past aspects of their lives. The term comes from the Bible story of Lot. When Lot and his wife were escaping the burning town of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot’s wife looked back, and she turned into a pillar of salt.)

with her past (culture, customs, language and memories) are variously broken, and so she often experiences herself and her identity as dislocated.

Again, such breaks with the past may be experienced by anyone and not only those who must travel. But as the exiled writer Salman Rushdie writes in his essay *Imaginary Homelands*: the person “who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being ‘elsewhere’” (1991, p. 12).

This disjunction between the past and the present as experienced by many migrants—an experience that is related to, but not reducible to, their geographical displacement—is a crucial point informing my analysis. That is, it must be stressed that this sense of an interrupted time or history that I have just alluded to is importantly related to, and exacerbated by, the sense of cultural displacement that many migrants experience: when she is not only geographically but also culturally displaced, she may experience, to different degrees, a loss of self and identity that is projected onto her history, and which also colours her sense of the present. That temporal location which her “authentic” or “original self” inhabited remains frozen in time like a black and white photograph that belongs to the past, and yet continues to exist in the present as a ghostly image. In other words, because of the sometimes difficulty of maintaining or rehabilitating a sense of “authentic” cultural identity and practices in a new environment, her authentic self is felt as belonging to both another time and another place. But the impossibility of returning to the past means that she must constantly reconstruct it and replay it imaginatively. Like a broken antique vessel that has been pieced together, her true self comes to resemble her reassembled memories of the past.

This explains as well the importance of “exilic narratives” through which the past is continually repeated and an “imaginary geography”<sup>6</sup> of home is constructed. The loss of the power of self-narration—the loss of ability to speak about or relate one’s history to and with others in the world—is a central cause of the traumatic experience of displacement. Re-creative story telling then becomes a form of rehabilitation: literally, “restoring in the present” or “bringing back” a former state or condition that has become decayed or damaged. But paradoxically, this very strategy often only adds to the sense of loss or nostalgia. For as Hamid Naficy notes: such narratives “serve to authenticate a past and simultaneously to discredit the present” (1991, p. 289). A rift emerges and time itself is felt as perdition.

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<sup>6</sup> A phrase borrowed from Edward Said (2003, p. 55).

In order to redeem both past and present then, and to authenticate the sense in which the self inhabits both—to lessen the sense of displacement in other words—it is common for migrants, and especially diasporas to recreate a sense of home abroad through the maintenance of cultural identity, habits and practices—through re-forming an imagined community that embraces two discontinuous places. It is this subject—the formation and practices of diaspora communities—that I will examine in closer detail now.

## 2.4 The Diasporic Imagination

Where is home? On the one hand, “home” is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of “origin”. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality... (Brah, 1996, pp. 188-89)

These words of Avtar Brah encapsulate the ambivalent meaning and experience of “home” for one who is living in diaspora. It is not simply that for such an individual home is imagined as “elsewhere”; the very experience of being-at-home, wherever one happens to be, is always already something that is in a way imaginatively (re)constructed. Home is “the lived experience of locality”, as Brah (1996, p. 192) notes; but that lived experience is inseparable from the activity of world-“making” through which the world is experienced as familiar. It is about experiencing the world, the space that one inhabits, as meaningful. On the one hand, the space that the self inhabits determines what is there to be experienced and made meaningful; being-at-home, as Sara Ahmed observes, “suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 89). But we should also add to this: our experience of being-at-home involves imaginatively transforming the spaces we inhabit. Home is both “there” and the product of our “being there”: our worlding desire to make sense of the world. It is for this reason that even one who stays put can experience home as a foreign land: whenever the unfamiliar intrudes into our experience, when our experience of the world does not conform with our idea of the world, we no longer feel at home in the world. The world that we have to some extent “made” no longer makes sense.

What I am pointing to here is the idea that our sense of home is a lived experience of a particular place that is both shaped by, and inhabits our imaginations. Home is “imagined”, but it is important to note that imagined here does not mean—by definition—“unreal”. Rather, imagining refers to a way of thinking and experiencing “the real” that also involves imaging and desire. But when we travel, the longer we are away, the more that sense of home that we carry with us comes to exist solely in our imaginations, loosed from that concrete experience of the

place that shaped it—a place that always was and is changing and could never be fully contained by our limited imaginings. It is in this sense that “home” becomes a mythical place of no return in the diasporic imagination, an impossible destination, as Brah describes, just because when it is overlayed with memories it comes to exist not only there “somewhere else” but also in the past and its imaginative reconstruction(s).

For diasporas then, the “pain of returning” is literally “nostalgia”: not only the desire to return home but the painfulness that is associated with the irretrievability of the past. This double loss leads to what I call (following Hamid Naficy, 1991) the cultural practice of nostalgia. That is, just as the nostalgic person re-lives the past as a sort of cure, similarly, for diasporas, the pain of being separated from home is partially cured by re-living the experience of being at home. This is achieved especially through wearing the “signs” and constantly performing the embodied cultural practices that characterise the imagined community of home.

But like the simulation of time experienced in the nostalgic return to the past, the effect of transplanting cultural practices in a new setting is that such practices also often acquire a hyperreal or imitative character. This is not because culture, broadly speaking, cannot move—that it is something fixed and always rooted in one place; rather I am suggesting the opposite: the very experience of moving, of being displaced, often leads diaspora communities to treat culture as something static that cannot change. It becomes fetishised. Cultural practices tend to become reified or objectified, and their most outward or visible manifestations are performed as a way of signalling group identification and belonging. At the same time however, the need to fit in in the new society often leads migrants to adopt the performative aspects of the *host* culture as well.

## 2.5 Summary

The present chapter has aimed to give a sense of the different contours in the experience of migration, particularly as a non-Western immigrant to the West. I have examined the link between both the experience and causes of displacement and the phenomenon of modernity more generally, but more specifically, the sense of duality—of looking into directions, both temporally and geographically—that is a permanent feature of living in diaspora. Here, I focussed on the idea of “performatively” healing that rift which displacement opens up, or the way that home is constructed in and through the diasporic imagination, which as described above, is closely linked to the “cultural practice of nostalgia” and the rituals of nationalism.

These ideas have deeply informed the first series of work that I produced as part of my creative arts research, *In-Between Spaces*, which I will present in Chapter 4 below. In the following chapter, though, I will first of all discuss another line of theoretical enquiry that I have explored through my research and practice. It concerns the politics of representation and identity and their relationship to colonial discourses.

## 3 REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE

### 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined some of the salient factors in the experience of migration and living in diaspora. In addition to the pain of being uprooted itself and the longing to return home, the “nostalgia” that afflicts all migrants to different degrees, I pointed to a particular cause and aspect of this nostalgia in the experience of displacement. For many diasporas, the construction of narratives of exile and return, and the imagining of “home” as not only geographically removed but as existing in the past both produces (and is produced by) an unrealisable longing for the homeland. The present is experienced as loss, and so an imaginary geography of home is constructed in the exilic imagination. But such constructions are unstable and tend to produce an essential sadness, since—in the words of Hamid Naficy—“the ‘real’ past threatens to reproduce itself as a lack or loss” too (Naficy, 1991, p. 289). Thus “the nostalgic past must be turned into a series of nostalgic objects” (ibid, p. 289). This double loss leads to (what Naficy calls) the “cultural practice of nostalgia”.

In this chapter, my aim is to examine another and different aspect of the struggles associated with the experience of migration, namely, issues of representation. As in the previous chapter, I will examine these issues in light of the history of European colonisation and the manufacturing of colonial discourses. But while the earlier discussion focused on issues of displacement that potentially affect all migrants and diasporas, in this chapter I will focus on issues that concern non-Western migrants specifically.

Very simply, my argument in this chapter is that in addition to the trials of migration itself, many non-Western migrants to Western countries are also subjected to experiences of racism and marginalisation: they are discriminated against by the host culture because of their perceived otherness, and mocked for their different practices, customs and habits. Such experiences, as I have mentioned, are rooted in the history of European colonisation and those discursive constructions (such as Orientalism) that allowed the West to dominate its colonial subjects. But despite the efforts of countless post-colonial theorists of the last century to expose these narrative constructions, widespread racism and other forms of discrimination have been reignited in recent years and decades because of terrorism and the accelerated movement of refugees—phenomena that are themselves the partial legacies of Western imperialism.

Again, the ideas and research presented in this chapter fed directly into the development of the first major body work that I produced as part of my creative arts research—*In-Between Spaces*—which will be presented in the following chapter. However, they are also central to understanding the second major body of work that I produced—*Under Western Eyes*—which deals more squarely with questions about identity, representation and so on than questions about migration as such. It is partly for this reason that I discuss them here at length in a separate chapter. I shall refer back to many of the ideas discussed here when presenting that work in Chapter 4.

### 3.2 Identity

By way of linking some of the themes discussed in the previous chapter to the issues that I will focus on here, I will begin by discussing the sense of loss or discontinuity of cultural, social and personal identity<sup>7</sup> experienced by many migrants—especially migrants of non-Western background.

In the voluntary or forced movement from one nation to another, the experience of being dislocated from one's native homeland, it is common for migrants to experience their rigid identity as scattered and redefined into new points of becoming. But such issues related to identity become a concern especially for displaced individuals who are marginalised or targeted with racism, or who are ascribed identities through different forms of racial and other coding.

In describing this phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge that an individual's identity is not shaped by one variable only, but is rather formed within a complex matrix of variables such as sexuality, race, gender, class, religion, community, ethnicity and so forth (Robertson and McDaniel, 2010, p. 46). It is also essential to understand identity not as a finished product, but rather as a social construction, something that is constantly "re-negotiated" in different contexts through different practices and sites of experience (Sarup, 1996, p. 40). Our identities are woven together, often from vastly different elements, and the struggle that we face is to maintain their coherence—to integrate these elements into a coherent "self" image. In this context Katherine Ewing (1990, p. 273) describes the importance of (biographical) narrative and self-representation:

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<sup>7</sup> *Cultural identity* reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provides us as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and variations of our actual history (Hall, 1990). *Social identity* is given to an individual by someone who does not know that individual well, to whom he or she is more or less a "stranger" (Goffman, 1959). *Personal identity* forms based on knowledge of an individual as a "unique" person, as someone who has specific characteristics and a biographical history (Goffman, 1959).

...as long as an individual is able to maintain contextually appropriate self-representations in interaction with others, he or she may experience a sense of continuity despite the existence of multiple, unintegrated or partially integrated self-representations...

Ewing notes that “[s]elf-representations are embedded in a particular frame of reference, are culturally shaped, and are highly contextual”; but those contexts rapidly shift, and as such self-representations are often “rendered inadequate by explicit conflict” (ibid, p. 274). The ability “to maintain an experience of wholeness in the face of radical contradictions” then depends on “keeping only one frame of reference in mind at any particular moment” (ibid, p. 274).

For many migrants, it is precisely this capacity to keep one frame of reference in mind, and thus to maintain an experience of “wholeness” that is threatened by their experience of dislocation. The particular difficulty they face is that these self-representations, and the frames of reference in which they are embedded, often conflict in ways that cannot be easily reconciled.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the constant desire to maintain the cultural habits of the local self in a foreign land often makes it difficult for diasporas to connect with the dominant culture and population in their relocated society. While struggling to adjust to the norms of the host country, diasporas continually look back at their original roots and traditions. So, besides the lack of a shared history with the members of the new society, this looking backwards isolates them from the cultural scene of their adopted nation. Living in this in-between space challenges diasporas’ sense of identity, and alters how they conceive of themselves in relation to others.

At the same time, for many diasporas and migrants, the institutionalised stereotypes associated with their cultural or ethnic backgrounds produces further dislocation: through negative comparisons applying to their sexuality, habits, values and so on, such individuals are represented in stereotyped contrast to the dominant society and culture—an implicit system of value that constructs the Western mainstream identity as desirable and the norm. In this way, marginal and minority groups are not only targeted, but encouraged—consciously or unconsciously—to believe in their own inferiority, and thus to question their identity. Moreover, such reinforced stereotypes translate into the closing of doors on many fronts such as employment opportunities, career training, social services and so on (Thapan, 2005, p. 181) as well as other stigmatising effects.

These effects are produced and reproduced through representational codes that construct power in specific ways that will be examined in the following section. But it is crucial to note that such codes operate not only explicitly, but through being internalised by the oppressed subject herself. The Trinidad-born, East Indian writer Sam Selvon provides a vivid illustration of how these representational codes operate:



... this gut feeling I had as a child, that the Indian was just a piece of cane trash, while the white man was to be honoured and respected—where had it come from? I don't consciously remember being brainwashed to hold this view either at home or at school (cited in McLeod, 2000, p. 17).

Since the 1950s, post-colonial theorists began examining these issues in relation to colonial “discourses of power” that seek to legitimate certain forms of domination by imposing a logic of binary oppositions between the coloniser and colonised. In all of these oppositions, the first term (applying to the coloniser) is privileged, thereby producing a hierarchal relationship which constructs the colonial subject as subordinate and inferior. As Kathryn Woodward (1997, p. 2) notes, “[i]dentities are produced, consumed and regulated within culture—creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation”. How these systems of representation operate through colonial discourses is examined in the following section.

### 3.3 Discourses and colonialism

The study of discourses in post-colonial theory, as in other social science disciplines, is ultimately related to the pioneering work of the French social theorist and historian Michel Foucault, who developed the term and a framework of discourse analysis in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002 [1972]). Foucault employed the term “discourse” to refer not simply to instances of written or spoken communication, but rather systems of knowledge—ideas, beliefs, practices and so on—through which the social world, or worlds,<sup>8</sup> are constructed, and which determine to some extent how we think about and act in the world. In slightly different terms, the term discourse in Foucault's analysis refers to a strongly bounded area of “social knowledge”—a set of rules, or a system of statements—within which and through which the world and the objects/subjects that make it up are known. For example, culturally/historically specific discourses around sex and sexuality will regulate the ideas, beliefs, and norms of behaviour that regulate what a community “knows” about women, and how they should act or be acted towards, and what their social roles are, in contrast with men's. And as this latter point suggests, Foucault's understanding of discourses is bound up with the idea of power. Indeed, examining the essential connection between knowledge and power in all domains of social life, and especially in particular knowledge disciplines (medicine, law, and so on) is a central focus of much of Foucault's work, and it is one that has been pursued by

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<sup>8</sup> That is: because there are always multiple systems of knowledge describing the world we live in, the social worlds that depend on them are plural also, and they may compete or overlap in different ways. For example—as I shall discuss below—the system of knowledge that regulated how Western (colonial) powers understood the Orient was quite different to that system of knowledge through which “Orientals” knew themselves.

subsequent researchers in regards to other areas of social knowledge—and notably, by Edward Said in his ground-breaking work *Orientalism* .

We can think of discourses, then, as statements, but not merely in the sense of what *is* said about the world, but as authorising what *can be* said about the world. The idea, as Ashcroft et al. (2013, p. 62) note, is that “the world is not simply ‘there’ to be talked about”, but rather that “it is through discourse itself that the world is brought into being”. But the world includes ourselves, and so, as a social formation, discourse “works to constitute reality not only for the objects it appears to represent but also for the subjects who form the community on which it depends” (ibid, p. 37). In other words, discourse is importantly related to the construction of subjectivity as well—how we understand ourselves and others and our relationships to each other (ibid, p. 63).

In this sense, then, “colonial discourses” (as used in this exegesis) refers to those statements and practices through which specifically colonial relationships have been organised and (re)produced. Crucial here as well is the idea of representation, which is a concept also discussed by Foucault, but one developed further by (among others) the Jamaica-born sociologist and political activist, Stuart Hall, whose work on racial/cultural identity has profoundly shaped the area of cultural theory. In the following section, I shall draw on Hall’s investigations concerning representation and meaning/signification in his important work *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* (1997).

### 3.4 Representation and meaning

As Stuart Hall notes, representation is essentially linked to meaning; it is “the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (Hall, p. 1997, p. 15) and it is what “connects” meaning and language to culture. Language itself is a system of representation insofar as words and signs “stand-for” (or represent) concepts and things; but the important point that Hall points out is that representations determine how we use and interpret language, and therefore too how meaning is produced. Drawing on Foucault, Hall basically adopts a constructivist approach which says that the meanings we ascribe to things through language is not inherent in those things, nor in language itself, but is rather constructed through those systems of representation that determine, again, how language is used, and how language is used to generate meaning. Language does not simply reflect the world; our world is constructed through language; and like language itself, the meaning that it produces is

something historically and contextually dependent. The particular systems of representation that operate in a given context determine what is meaningful and meaningful in what way.

We can think of a parallel with the modern problem of knowledge. All knowledge involves representation, and we cannot know the world outside of how reality is (re)presented to or for us; but representations do not simply stand-for the reality or object they represent; rather, they are made or produced by us, as historically constituted subjects, depending on our experience and beliefs and so on. As such, our knowledge of the world is inseparable from its historically and contextually produced representations.

Importantly too for Foucault, representation is not only linked to meaning but also to knowledge. This is what connects language to discourse. Discourse itself is that system of representations that not only determines how language is used to generate meaning, but how knowledge too is generated (Hall, 1997). We can think of systems of representation generating knowledge in the same way that a code generates the meaning and activities produced by signs in different contexts. A red sign means “stop”; a green sign means “go”, and so on. Knowledge (and the activities that relate to it) is produced through systems of representation—through discourse—in a similar way (Hall, 1997).

Perhaps the most important point to note here though is that, for Foucault and Hall, such discursive knowledge is related to power. That is: power is *enacted* through “regimes of truth” or “knowledge” that position subjects in specific ways and according to sets of hierarchical values. John McLeod describes the connection between discourse, language and power in this way:

...discourses form the intersections where language and power meet. Language, let us remember, is more than simply a means of communication; it constitutes our world-view by cutting up and ordering reality into meaningful units. The meanings we attach to things tell us which values we consider are important, and how we learn or choose to differentiate between superior or inferior qualities (McLeod, 2000, p. 18).

So, it is through colonial discourses that the “truth” of the colonised subject’s inferiority is produced, and it is this knowledge that permits the colonial power to implement its rule—to enact its will to domination. Knowledge enacts power; it determines how we perceive others, and thus it determines how social relationships are enacted also.

In connection with this point it is crucial to understand that the manner in which the colonial subject is “positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation” is the effect of “a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation” (Hall, 1990, pp. 223-4) that operates through the colonial subject herself. Knowledge, that is, has the power to makes us see and experience ourselves in conformity with the dominant representations that produce it. It is

internal, not external. It inhabits us just like culturally ingrained habitus gives us the “feel for the game” (see Bourdieu 1984). As such, it is not only through being subject to a dominant discourse that the colonial subject is dominated; domination is also achieved “by the power of inner compulsion and the subjective conformation to the norm” (Hall, 1990, p. 226).

It is too easy to think of power as simply coercive, used episodically by sovereign actors (see Foucault, 1998, p. 63). But Foucault reminds us that power is pervasive; it is embodied in discourse “and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them” (Gaventa, 2003, p. 1). So, the power of others over us can be enacted through ourselves and the subjective knowledge of ourselves that is produced by these discourses.

This point is crucial for understanding the traumatic character of the colonial experience as Hall points out. The colonial subject is not only made to feel inferior through being subjected to dominant representations; she herself may come to believe in her own inferiority and acknowledge the “truth” of these representations.

This is related as well to the experience of “double consciousness” (or “dual consciousness”) that I mentioned in the previous chapter, referring to an internal conflict that is produced by the “clash” between an imposed set of values and an individual's sense of their self or self-worth, or the sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of an oppressive other. More broadly, this term refers to the way in which the colonised subject must wear different masks in a racist society that regards her as inferior, and so come to identify with different masks in different contexts.

### 3.5 Post-colonial art and essentialism

The art world embraced essentialism in the 1970s when artists started to identify themselves with a group to make general statements about the experiences that members of this group shared. For instance, feminist artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, Nancy Spero and Monica Sjoo focused on themes involving women and their representation in various cultures, and made art about typical tasks carried out by women (such as house cleaning) as well as other facts about women (like pregnancy and giving birth) to resist any claims that women are naturally matched to nurture these roles (see Broude and Garrard, 1994).

This image has been removed for copyright reasons

**Figure 3.1** Monica Sjoo (1970), Past and Present [Oil on panel 120 x 240 cm]

The term “essentialism” began to be applied to any artworks that made generalised statements about or relied on stereotyped concepts of identity—even if the aim was to revalorise them. By the late 1980s, the art world became overloaded with works that were considered to be too sweeping in their subject matter, and critics started to accuse essentialists of attaching certain characteristics to women or Black people and making claims about their identity based on their natural or biological qualities.

As a way of avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and its biological determinism, the India-born literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak advanced the idea of “strategic essentialism”, which refers to the positive or constructive use of essentialism for political purposes (Spivak, 1987). In this framework, positing a group identity with common features is justified as a way of advancing the group’s interests while continuing to debate and contest the hegemony of an imposed or essential identity (Lazarus, 2004, p. 209). For instance, Spivak refers to subordinate or marginalised social groups and argues that they may temporarily put aside local differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity through which they band together in political movements. To create solidarity and strengthen their presence in society, they have to extract a core element of a group or population and emphasise it. She recognises that while terms such as “Indian”, “African”, “Oriental” or “Native American” may be manufactured and suppress highly significant differences, they nonetheless do important work. The formation of fields such as African American studies and Women’s studies are considered as the examples of strategic essentialism.

During the 1980s and 1990s, many African American artists too employed what might be considered a form of strategic essentialism to examine their African identity and its sociological meaning. The works of Faith Ringgold, Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight, Raymond Saunders and

Kerry James Marshall are perfect examples of this movement, which identified “blackness” as an essential and laudable component of what it means to be an African American. By emphasising and exaggerating the colour black, they criticised the practice of employing the term “*black* to refer to any African American of any skin coloration”, while at the same time celebrating “the color black’s distinctive formal beauty” (Robertson and McDaniel, 2010, p. 45).

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**Figure 3.2** Kerry James Marshall (1992), *Could This Be Love*  
[Acrylic and collage on canvas, 85”x92”]

In a series of watercolour portraits titled *The Next Generation* (1994-95), the South African born artist Marelene Dumas displays images of “anonymous young people” of different backgrounds “amidst portraits of well-known personalities” (Smith, 2011, p. 233). As Smith notes, this suggests that “shaping one’s identity is a challenge as socially dispersed as it is individually focussed, and that it will be faced and answered by those depicted, not external authorities or abstract categories” (Smith, 2011, p. 233).

Dumas (1995) expresses her hopes for change through a poem from which the title of her work is also borrowed:

When Black and white are colors and not races, people will still fall in love and discriminate between partners and feel sad and bad and need art that breaks your heart and takes you to those places where pain becomes beauty.

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**Figure 3.3** Marelene Dumas (1994-5), *The Next Generation* [Mixed media on paper]

Artists also started to resist the Western politics of representation during the 1990s by visually exploring their identities from their own perspectives, seeking a voice and taking control of their own self-representations through the inversion of racially-coded ascribed roles and identities (Robertson and McDaniel, 2010, p. 52). One artist whose practice embodies such a form of resistance is Yinka Shonibare. This London-born Nigerian visual artist creates artworks across various mediums that seek to show the contradictions of both contemporary and historical representations of Africans and the encoded hierarchies of class and race that give rise to them. In a series of photographs called *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), Shonibare challenges Victorian era narratives concerning Africans by inverting the stereotyped signs of otherness on which they depend. Through the figure of the “black dandy” (played by the artist himself) with his flattering white servants and acolytes (Shonibare MBE 2009), the images in this series “invert” the narrative that we would usually see played out in the history of Western painting. Here the viewer is presented with an “unusual” scene in which a black man placed in the position of the ruling class replaces the white male character of the well-known paintings of Victorian era. Through these images, Shonibare re-writes Eurocentric historical narratives to celebrate his Africanness and at the same time resist the subaltern image of black people preserved by white-male dominated history.

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**Figure 3.4** Yinka Shonibare (1998), *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*  
[Photographic print]

Today then, such questions around identity are being explored as much by artists as scholars and social commentators writing about multiculturalism, diversity and globalisation, with all of them seeking to reject damaging essentialism and deconstruct the politics of racism. Instead of looking for points of similarity and sameness defining a group, internal differences, multiple characteristics and affiliations are being observed to define new forms of identity that reflect changing realities and shifting contexts and communities (Robertson and McDaniel, 2010, p. 46).



### 3.6 Summary

Building on some of the themes discussed in Chapter 2, the present chapter has aimed to delve more deeply into many of those political and epistemological concerns that are essential to understanding the situation and experiences of non-Western subjects today in the light of the Western representational codes and politics. As well as examining issues to do with identity and representation more generally, I have focussed on how these operate in and through colonial discourses and practices such as Orientalism, as well as some of those strategies that (post)colonial subjects and theorists have developed in response to them, including nationalism and (strategic) essentialism. I also discussed these latter concerns in the context of image-making that is specifically aimed at countering the discourses introduced earlier.

Through the vehicle of my own creative practice, I have developed several bodies of work that aim to address in some way all of the main themes presented in the preceding chapters. In the following chapter, I will present a short analysis of the first series of work that I produced in response to them. It should be noted, however, that the theoretical reflections outlined in the present chapter are especially relevant to the second major body of work that I produced as part of my creative practice, *Under Western Eyes*, which will be presented in Chapter 6.

## 4 IN-BETWEEN SPACES (2011)

*In-Between Spaces* is a series of photographs, illustrating social parodies based on performative masquerade. The images capture the juxtaposed nature of an identity, which is in transition between paradoxical spaces through migration. Created based on my personal encounters as a migrant in Australia, this series criticize the current nationalistic fantasies that intend to enforce a standard image of what it means to be an Australian. It also depicts the migrant's resistance to the standardization of identities by emphasizing on their traditional costumes and habits. What makes an individual immigrant suffer is the desire for familiar roots in a foreign land. They occupy pre-existing cultural structures of the host community while at the same time attempt to maintain his/ her own locality. Living 'in-between' these opposing spaces alter how an individual conceives the concept of identity, home, border and culture.

**Artist statement**  
***In-Between Spaces* (2011)**

### 4.1 Introduction

The first major body of work that I produced during my PhD studies is a series of staged colour photographs titled *In-Between Spaces* (completed in 2011). As described in the introduction to this exegesis, the major theme that I was seeking to explore during this phase of my creative arts research had to do with the experiences associated with cultural and physical displacement as a non-Western migrant who has relocated to the West (or in my case, Western Australia) and how these experiences might be communicated through a visual medium. As described earlier, some of the main concerns that motivated me to produce this work included not only my own personal experiences as a migrant, but also the recognition that themes to do with physical and cultural displacement and the loss of identity associated with these experiences also seemed to be recurring themes in the visual works of many other artists like myself. So, in exploring these themes through my studio practice, I was in part responding to the work of other artists of similar cultural background to myself<sup>9</sup>, or asking a critical and reflexive question about our shared situation. That is, observing that the works produced by such artists often tended to visually communicate the same themes around the loss of connection to home and the loss of identity associated with living in-between different spaces of migration, and struggling with these questions myself, I began to investigate the roots of these experiences, and the individual and collective ways that we negotiate them—both in our day-to-day lives and aesthetically.

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<sup>9</sup> Examples include Larissa Sansour, Hossein Valamanesh, Siamak Fallah, Nasim Nasr, Mona Hatoum, Emily Jacir, Shirin Neshat, Kader Attia, Yinka Shonibare, Pooneh Maghazehe and many more.

As described in Chapter 2, through researching these questions I was led to consider two salient factors about the experience of migration: firstly, that the sense of loss and disconnection associated with migration is—for reasons examined earlier—especially acute for diasporas and migrants (now living in the West) from non-Western or culturally-othered backgrounds; and secondly, that both the cause of this sense of disconnection, and the attempt to overcome it, often involves a process of imaginatively constructing two different homelands: the one that the émigré has left behind, and her new home—the place of migration—neither of which she often feels (any longer) to fully belong to. Thus, one of the main elements in this experience is the sense of duality—of constantly looking in two directions, and experiencing one’s identity as split, or at least pulled in opposing direction—or in other words, of living in an in-between space. And as described in Chapter 3, this feeling of duality is also echoed in the experience of being othered, or of looking at oneself through the eyes of an Other, which goes hand-in-hand with different forms of racism and marginalisation experienced by migrants and (post)colonial subjects.

So then, the images or metaphors used to describe the situation and experience of migrants and other marginal subjects very often revolve around ideas of duality or doubleness, hybridity, opposition, liminality, juxtaposition, and contrapuntality.

Moreover, the sense of displacement just described—of not or no longer fully belonging—not only explains or sheds light on the sense of loss or sadness that often accompanies the experience of migration and its visualisation, but also another aspect of the concrete forms of expression associated with it: namely, the often essentialised image that a migrant builds up in regards to both of her homes. For as described in Chapter 2, in the “diasporic imagination”, both the image of that place that a migrant has left behind, and the memory of living there, are often imagined romantically or ideally, and elements of this “ideal” image permeate her diasporic existence as she tries to maintain a connection to her homeland through performing or surrounding herself with its rituals and symbols in her new home. So, objects holding cultural significance and memories (such as local dress, decor, carpets, artworks and so on) come to hold, more and more, a sort of magical significance, insofar as they serve to recreate a sense of home. But at the same time, a migrant often finds herself doing something similar in relation to the symbols and rites of the new host culture, as she performs the national rites or adopts the most visible—or superficial—aspects of the local culture in order to “fit in” in her new home. And similar to the point mentioned a moment ago about the sense of doubleness or duality that a migrant experiences through the process of othering, adopting elements of the new culture is often a strategy of shielding oneself against racism, or of signalling to the new community that

the cultural identity a migrant brings with her is not incompatible with the dominant local culture. But this strategy—the attempt to harmonise these elements of her cultural identity—can also reduplicate or heighten the sense of being split that she already feels through her displacement because of the “clash” between these cultural elements. Moreover, by surrounding oneself in different ways with these essentialised or token examples of cultural belonging, the migrant’s life—aesthetically speaking—comes to take on an almost caricatured appearance of superficial absurdity, marked by juxtaposition and exaggeration.

As such, my strategy in making *In Between Spaces* was not to emphasise the pain in this situation, but rather the sometimes absurdity of strategies meant to overcome it, or the way in which they often add to the sense of dislocation experienced by the migrant: the sense of living in an in-between space. Similarly, in seeking to communicate this experience visually, my first aim was to highlight the sense of duality or opposition, and of contradictoriness, that is inherent in it this experience both psychologically and, as it were, outwardly or aesthetically.

In the following sections, then, I shall describe first of all some of the personal experiences that I drew on in making this series—scenarios that I encountered and then tried to imagine visually—as well as the sources of visual inspiration that contributed to the development of the visual language and techniques employed in this series.

## 4.2 Personal experiences

Between 2009-11, when I was living in Perth, I experienced an extreme level of racism, as well as physical and mental attacks, almost on a regular basis. During that period, I also noticed a high level of tension on the surface of the city, in which the white population seemed to be struggling with the presence of migrants and Aboriginal people in their proximity. From my work environment (in a suburban photography studio) to supermarkets or going out to the bars or cafes—almost everywhere—I was mocked or attacked because of my accent, and for having a darker skin color and features, being insulted verbally with words such as: “We’re full!”, “Get the hell out of this country!”, “Go back to where you came from!”, “Love it or leave it!”, and many other abuses. The presence of Australian flag was very strong too—it was hanging off people’s balconies, almost in every street, from car windows, tattooed on people’s bodies or marked on their clothing, as an indicator of being a “genuine” Australian. After a while, the flag started functioning as a danger alarm for me, defining a territory that I should not get close to.

I moved in and out of the Iranian migrant community after relocating to Australia, and I was taught by them about what it means to be an Australian—about how I should act and appear if I wanted to be seen as one. It did not take long to learn about the stereotypical national icons that many Australians take pride in: the sun and the beach; the family picnic and the barbeque; a big backyard with a hills-hoist in it; Vegemite, kangaroos, footie, beer, and slang phrases. I remember how I started using Aussie slang in my conversations with people (obviously with a strong Persian accent). I watched how quickly it transformed their perception of me from a “bloody immigrant” to a “funny/cute chick”. So, I used it more often when I wanted to be liked by someone—even if it meant making a clown of myself. I also remember when I first bought a pair of thongs and I started wearing them on the streets instead of wearing shoes, I felt one step closer to being a real Australian (no pun intended!).

Then there was Australia Day, which for most bigots was considered a sacred day because it was the only day that they were allowed to freely express their resentment towards immigrants and non-whites in general. I remember my first Australia Day experience in Perth when I went to watch the fireworks at Swan River. There was a large crowd there, a mixture of both white Australians and migrants picnicking along the river with their families and waiting for the celebration to start. What was so fascinating to me was the number of migrants there who were wearing the Australian flag or items decorated with it, strangely mixed with the patterns of their traditional outfits, surrounded by men in thongs setting up barbeques and making sausages for their families, drinking beer, while their kids and wives were waving flags in the air and shouting “Aussie Aussie Aussie, oi oi oi!” Not long after the firework show finished, a group of young white Australians, who were evidently drunk, attacked an Indian family who were sitting in front of me, and aggressively pulled their Australian flags off of their shoulders, broke down their barbeque and started punching and yelling “We’re full!”

That incident terrified me and stuck with me for a long time. And many other similar instances came after, in which I was also confronted by these violent acts of racism and nationalistic fantasies. I started studying and observing this phenomenon very closely, and this is what led me to pursue the creative arts research culminating in the series *In-Between Spaces*.

The image of that Indian woman on Australia day in her Sari dress and the Australian flag wrapped around her shoulders became the starting point of this series. To me, it represented not only the peculiar situation of the migrant, but also the ground on which institutionalised multiculturalism has been built up—the strategy of reducing cultures to a series of habits and symbols, simply juxtaposing one against the other, and sometimes DJ-ing them all together. This clichéd formula for dealing with cultural difference—visually displaying the superficial aspects

of the host and new cultures side-by-side in order to turn the frightening presence of an intruder (the migrant or refugee) into something strangely familiar—has proved to be both appealing and appalling at the same time.

I was mostly drawn to the banality of this display—how it is drawn to the surface of things—and acted out by the general public every day, like a street performance or theater. That banal performance was exactly what I wanted to portray in my images.

### 4.3 Visual inspiration

As I have just indicated, the main visual inspiration for this series was found in the very experiences of nationalism and of living in diaspora that I was seeking to communicate and critique, since they are already highly visual and often superficial. However, I also drew inspiration from multiple other resources that I found most relevant to the concept I was aiming to communicate and which I shall discuss briefly here.

#### 4.3.1 Persian miniature

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**Figure 4.1** Persian woman embroidering [Fragment of a Persian miniature]. 16<sup>th</sup> century, Iran

The first point of reference and inspiration for me was the Persian miniature. I have long been interested in the way that figures are often portrayed in these paintings—their theatrical and performative gestures narrating multiple stories on a flat surface. Persian miniatures, to me, are

a great example of configuring surfaces—a way of seeing the surface and the depth of things, the past and the present, inside and outside, simultaneously. Moreover, I found the performativity of the characters in these miniatures very close to how I observed the current nationalism as a collective performance presented on the surface of the society (see Chapters 2.4 and 3.5 above). So I started off by making images that were replicating the poses and compositions in the classical Persian miniatures. I also gathered similar garments and clothing to the ones illustrated in the miniatures, and studied the colour palate of the paintings to use a similar one in my staged scenarios. This was intended to strongly reference to my cultural identity, but in a loud, bold and tacky language.

#### 4.3.2 Yinka Shonibare

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**Figure 4.2** Yinka Shonibare (2011), Fake Death Picture (The Suicide – Manet) [Photograph]

Another major visual inspiration behind this series was the work of the London-born Nigerian visual artist Yinka Shonibare (discussed in Chapter 3.6 above) and his use of performance and humour in his works (including installations, video and photography) in which he tackles issues surrounding the historical and political representation of Black identity and representation. I was especially influenced by Shonibare's photographic work—above all the *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) (discussed earlier), and *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (2008). While Shonibare's work deals with some of the darkest moments in the history of colonisation, including racism towards Blacks and their exclusion from historical narratives, his use of humour and postmodern techniques of juxtaposing existing visual material filled with references to local cultural elements creates a new form of aesthetic and visual critique that is not only

visually enticing, but also conceptually accessible and engaging, and therefore useful as mode of popular and ironic critique.

#### 4.3.3 Staged photography

The method of creating the images in the series *In-Between Spaces* and their style were more generally highly influenced by the genre of tableau or staged photography.

The term “tableau” refers to the French *tableau vivant*, or “living picture”, which describes a striking group of costumed actors or artist’s models, carefully posed and often theatrically lit (Art & Popular Culture 2017).

Early photography involved long exposure hours, so there was always the need for staging and constructing scenes in which the subject had to hold a pose for a long time without moving. So from the beginning, the history of fine art photography became closely associated with the process of staging and stabilising the subject matter. This gave rise to Still Life and portrait photography, which gradually became more and more narrative based, involving multiple characters and scenes. Notable examples are David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson in the 1840s and Oscar Gustav Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson from 19th century that involve staged classical scenes with actors.

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**Figure 4.3** David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson (1843-1847),  
Visita pastorale [Photograph]



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**Figure 4.4** Henry Peach Robinson (1858), *Fading Away* [Albumen print, combination print from five negatives, 24.4 x 39.3cm]

Tableau photography became known and popular in the 1980s through the work of artists such as Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman, referring to artificially constructed and staged scenes designed for the purpose of photographic image making (Artsy 2007).

In contemporary photography, tableau and staged photography usually refers to the kind of image making that conveys an imaginary or meticulous scene, often hyper-real, colourful or more detailed and dramatic than the reality that it is portraying. It is similar to marrying the art of the theatrical stage with that of photography to narrate an entire story in one image. If the images are created as a series (though not necessarily a sequential one), then this normally involves responding to a specific theme or concept. The narrative is often intentionally ambiguous or mysterious—a means of engaging the audience or encouraging viewers to devote some extra time with the image to decode the narrative.

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**Figure 4.5** Jeff Wall (1995), *A Sudden Gust of Wind* [Photographic print]

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**Figure 4.6** Cindy Sherman (1978), *Untitled film still #12* [Gelatin silver print]

#### 4.4 Visual elements and formula

In making the images in the series *In-Between Spaces*, I first conceived various characters that I wanted photograph and a selection of scenes for the characters to perform. I wrote a series of

short scenarios based on my personal experiences of being targeted and confronted with racism and nationalistic fantasies in Australia. I chose a number of elements that kept reappearing on national television and other platforms dedicated to celebrating the Australian character and culture; national icons and symbols such as the Hills Hoist, the Southern Cross, footie, the beach, beer, BBQs, thongs, mooning and vegemite.

For the images/scenes set in interior spaces, I constructed stages, while for the outdoor scenes, I drove around Perth to find suitable locations for the narrative I wanted to convey in the images. I also purchased traditional oriental costumes and fabrics from Iran for the characters to wear. However, I did not want the characters to represent Iranian culture only, but a wider selection of cultures evoking the so-called “Orient”. I took inspiration from Persian miniature, which is a visual artform that belongs not only to Iran, but other countries as well such as India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Tajikistan, and Mongolia. Persian miniature was the major source of inspiration for the poses and costumes of the fictional characters in these images.

The main visual formulae that were employed involved juxtaposing contrasting elements, just as we see on the surface of so-called multicultural societies (as described above): Oriental and Western cultures mixed together, the clash of tradition and modernity, cultures reduced to symbols and exotic icons; and then each of the visual elements chosen was exaggerated in order to heighten both the humour and absurdity of this situation, and at the same time, the underlying banality of this reality, which is also reflected in the bemused look of each of the characters in the images.

#### 4.5 Technical aspects

All of the images were shot on a digital camera. Studio lighting was also used for all of the images (both the indoor and outdoor locations) in order to emphasise the performative and fictionalised quality of the photographs by creating a flattened, surface appearance in which all of the elements appear simultaneously present, as in Persian miniatures. I wanted to create a cinematic look, while also subtly referencing commercial advertisements on billboards in order to highlight the way in which cultural difference is now being marketed and consumed in the marketplace of exoticism. (This theme would come into even stronger focus in the series *Under Western Eyes*.) Only minor editing and modification was made on the images in Photoshop.

A minimum of two and a maximum of three studio flash lights were used to create the images in this series. The lights were controlled through the use of soft-box, umbrella and barn doors. I also used a smoke machine in all the images to add a romantic and dreamy feel to them. The

machine was set up behind the characters with a flash light placed on the opposite side and slightly further back to illuminate the smoke and make it more visible in the resulting image. The effect of the smoke machine was more successful in the outdoor images where the background was darker and there was more air and room for it to move.

It was important for me to include myself in some of the constructed scenes, especially where the experience I was enacting was directly targeted at me. In these instances, I had to use a tripod and set up the camera on self-timer, which made the process of capturing the right moment even more challenging. In some cases, I had to repeat the poses more than forty or fifty times to finally capture the desired outcome.

## 4.6 Images and installation



**Figure 4.7** Hoda Afshar (2011), Dog's Breakfast [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.



**Figure 4.8** Hoda Afshar (2010), As Australian as a Meat Pie [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.



**Figure 4.9** Hoda Afshar (2011), A Stubbie Short of a Six Pack [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.



**Figure 4.10** Hoda Afshar (2011), Fair Shake of the Sauce Bottle [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.





**Figure 4.11** Hoda Afshar (2011), *If You Don't Love it, Live it* [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.



**Figure 4.12** Hoda Afshar (2011), *Loving the Aerial Ping Pong* [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.



**Figure 4.13** Hoda Afshar (2011), *Such is Life* [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.



**Figure 4.14** Hoda Afshar (2010), *We Didn't Grow Here, We Flew Here* [Digital photograph]. From the series *In-Between Spaces*.





## 5 MARKETING THE MARGINS

*Aboriginal Art—It's a White Thing*

Richard Bell (2003)

### 5.1 Introduction

In the present chapter,<sup>10</sup> I examine the central concerns that informed the second major body of work that I completed as part of my creative arts research: a series of manipulated photographs titled *Under Western Eyes* (2014). Similar to the preceding chapters, the present work and themes also relate to questions about the politics of representation, particularly as they concern the non-Western female subject. But more specifically, in this chapter, I examine how such politics operating within and through the global art scene have tended to reproduce a certain image of the latter subject (as other, inferior, and oppressed), whilst—almost paradoxically—rewarding those artists of similar cultural background who participate in the production and reproduction of these representations—even when they ostensibly seek to oppose such stereotyping through their artworks.

The main question that motivated the creative arts research that culminated in my second major series, *Under Western Eyes*, then, had to do with why many of the most widely circulated and commercially successful works of (specifically, but not exclusively) Iranian visual artists from the preceding decade-or-so tended to share a certain uniformity, both as regards their subject matter and visual style. And similar to the analysis presented in the preceding chapter, my investigation of this question focused on the way in which representations function within systems of power-knowledge, and in the present case, how they operate within a particular field of cultural production: the global-Western art market for culturally othered or marginal goods.

Before examining these dynamics in close detail, though, it will be useful to briefly describe the situation of Iranian art (and artists) on the global art scene in the last several decades in order to indicate more clearly the precise questions that motivated this phase of my creative arts research.

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<sup>10</sup> This chapter includes material that also appears in the following publication by the present author: Afshar, H. (2018). Veiling and Visibility: Iranian Art on the Global Scene. In S. Fotouhi & E. Zeiny (Eds.), *Seen and Unseen: Visual Cultures of Imperialism*. Leiden: Brill. An earlier version (Contesting Identities, Narratives and the Self) was presented at the 2013 Ballarat International Foto Biennale Symposium, Ballarat, Australia.

### 5.1.1 Iranian art on the global scene

As noted above, the motivation to pursue this phase of my creative arts research arose in response to my observation of the dynamics of the global art market, and its apparent preference for works of Middle Eastern artists that tended to communicate their cultural difference in fairly predictable and often superficial ways. For example, examining the works of some of the most well-known visual artists from Iran such as Shirin Neshat, Shadi Ghadirian, Shirin Ali-Abadi, Shahram Entekhabi and Houra Yaghoubi, as well as Iranian artists based in Australia such as Nasim Nasr, what was striking about them to me—despite this diagnosis in no way applying to all of their produced works, nor to each of them in the same way<sup>11</sup>—was their often singular focus on just a few overarching themes: female identity; the struggle of Iranian women; their being caught between two opposing currents—tradition and modernity. Not only this, their works all tend(ed) to encode or communicate their subject-matter in a highly similar, and almost formulaic, visual language involving visual juxtaposition, or the clash of heterogeneous elements and contexts—an almost post-modern language of *mélange*—and tying together their visuality and subject-matter, a single recurring image: the veil.

It is important to note at the outset that it is not the mere presence of these visual motifs or thematic concerns in these works that concerns me; each of them describes a certain reality in Iran, and there is no reason why an Iranian artist, whether living inside or outside Iran, should not find reason to communicate these themes through the medium of her practice. Regarding the constant appearance of the veil in such works, for example, this is perhaps easily explained by its constant presence in Iranians' lives. But what is notable here is the particular foregrounding and visibility of the veil in these works: the curious way that it simultaneously frames its subject and becomes its subject—its excessive visibility.

So my question—and one that has certainly been raised before—concerns why this particular image, the veiled Iranian woman, has come to represent in such a prominent way the face (pun intended) of Iranian art and women in the global art scene; for despite its omnipresence in their lives, the veil is still perhaps only the most visible expression of Iranian women's struggles.

Notable too is the somewhat different reactions that such works have tended to provoke inside and outside Iran respectively; for while it is certainly not the case that even the most successful of those artists mentioned above have been uncritically praised in the West, still, their works

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<sup>11</sup> Example works include: Shirin Neshat, *Unveiling* (1993) and *Women of Allah* (1993-1997); Shadi Ghadirian, *Qajar* (1998) and *Like Every Day* (2000-2001); Shirin Ali-Abadi, *Miss Hybrid* (2008); Shahram Entekhabi, *Islamic Vogue* (2001-2005); Houra Yaghoubi, *Who is My Generation* (2005).

have generally received far more negative critical attention in Iran. , in response to both Western but especially Iranian critics, artists such as Shirin Neshat have often had to defend themselves against charges of “stereotyping” Iranian women and highlighting their misery; of “fetishising” the veil, and so on. In the art scene that I grew up in Iran, the appearance of a new work that seemed to depict the veiled female Iranian subject in this way would very often elicit the same response: “It smells like the dollar”, many would say; the criticism being not that an artist might choose to make work about this subject as such, nor even endeavour to achieve the same success as, say, Neshat, but rather that the particular visual formula used to communicate it had become so formulaic, or typical. Fairly or not, it was and is often held to rest on or produce a certain stereotyped, or flat representation of its subject.

Stepping back, as Hamid Keshmirshekan (2010) has examined in detail, from the 1990s onwards in Iran there has been a general trend against art-making that is perceived as relying on a stereotyped view of Iranian identity, or that is shaped in any strong way by “the expectation and evaluation” of “others” (Keshmirshekan, 2010, p. 491)—works that are perceived to be based on a “subjective exotic view” of what is Iranian and contemporary, or made to meet the foreign demand for culturally “authentic” works (p. 498). But it is a trend that still exists for some. In an incendiary article published in *e-flux*, for instance, Barbad Golshiri (2009) writes: “I have distinguished a few dominant orientations in Tehran’s Art scene of today... Among these, the art market has chosen a certain trend: aestheticization of stereotypes”. But as both Keshmirshekan and Golshiri are careful to observe, this perceived trend—or the critique of this perceived trend—has much to do with the contact between Iranian art(ists) and the global contemporary art scene, which is itself shaped by hegemonic structures. So for these critics, and others too such as Foad Torshizi (2012), the immediate question is not necessarily whether self-exoticism functions in an artist’s works, but rather why it is that globally, the most successful or widely exhibited artworks of Iranian artists at least appear to many Iranian critics to be chosen “on a selective and representative basis”, which is to say, “provided that they reveal appropriate signs of cultural difference” (Keshmirshekan, 2010, p. 502). In other words—and granting that these works do share more than a superficial resemblance—these critics’ (and my) question concerns why it is that outside Iran especially, the works that have come to be seen as representative of Iranian art appear to deal with so few themes, and in so similar a fashion. For again, if an Iranian artist is criticised by her peers for “stereotyping”, this does not necessarily mean that she has consciously employed stereotypes; rather, it often reflects a view that her work, its visuality, lends itself to being read in terms of such stereotypes—of being suited to (if not consciously made for) a particular “outsider” gaze. Similarly, the dilemma for many critics and artists alike is

not that a work is saleable as such, but rather that its saleability is perhaps determined by its employment of a visual regime that serves to locate the artist and her artwork in a certain way, both in relation to and in the eyes of the (Western) viewer—and so too confirming a stereotyped view of what Iranian art is, and therefore what it is to be “Iranian”.

It should be noted that the commercial success of certain (ostensibly) similar works outside Iran may reflect nothing more than a passing trend and the dynamics of the international art scene, which tends both to demand and therefore to produce, periods of predictability and conformity. Similarly, the international success of certain artists may have—and certainly does have—much to do with their location: their working outside Iran, or in closer contact with European and North American galleries, and hence closer to the “global centre”. However, there are almost certainly deeper reasons for this too—reasons that have to do not only with the aggressive commodification of certain artists and their work, but also the “politics of location” and of “reception” which work together to construct what Foad Torshizi (following Hamid Dabashi) has referred to as an “imaginative geography” in which the works of Iranian artists are transformed “into tokens of their ethnic alterity and the falsely manufactured pastness attached to the name of their country” (Torshizi, 2012, p. 557). I say “not only”, but in fact the two are closely related; for the marketability of many works of non-Western artists, it can be argued, has everything to do with the alterity industry operating in and through the global art scene, whose agents do not simply discover but are actively involved in constructing the aforementioned “imaginative geography” while mining it (or its inhabitants) for new and culturally different works to enrich the market.

This then raises a crucial question about the way in which (neo)colonial and other discourses are not only involved in shaping, but are precisely sustained through what Tirdad Zolghadr (2006) once humorously referred to as the avenues of “ethnic marketing”. Today, that is, while the non-Western subject is “authorised” to speak—to re-present herself, rather than being represented as in earlier colonial discourses—still, “the ‘representational’ role of non-Western artists”, as Khaled Ramadan (quoted in Kesmirshekan, 2015, p. 119) notes, continues to be bound up with the strategy of “cultural difference”, which, he adds, “is now being institutionally legitimised through the construction of the ‘post-colonial other’ that is allowed to express itself only as long as it speaks of its own Otherness” (p. 119). From a slightly different perspective, Kesmirshekan (2010) has also noted how the problem of the marginality, or invisibility, of non-Western artists is bound up with “a rather perverse turn of thought that reconceptualizes cultural marginality” (p. 502). Continuing, he writes:

This thought presumes cultural marginality no longer as a problem of “invisibility” but one of an excessive “visibility” in terms of a reading of cultural difference that is too readily marketable. This also relates to the tendency in colonial thought to associate what is visually verifiable with “truth,” where superficial characteristics reflect the inner truth of being. (p. 503)

In the following sections, then, I shall briefly describe some of the ideological and discursive structures—forces operating behind and through the global contemporary art scene—that have (arguably) contributed to the visibility of certain works of Iranian artists, shaping in different ways *what* is seen and *how* it is seen, or how such putatively marginal works come to acquire value and meaning and serve different interests in different contexts.

## 5.2 Veiled commodities

In his work *The Post-Colonial Exotic: marketing the margins*, Graham Huggan (2001) has provided one of the most insightful analyses describing the way in which (what he refers to as) “postcolonial cultural production” is profoundly shaped by its contact with the global market. He notes the manner in which postcolonial literature specifically (although the formula applies just as well to other forms of artistic production that share similar concerns) is caught between two “regimes of value”—what he refers to as “postcolonialism” and “postcoloniality”, respectively (p. 5). The former, as he describes, “relates to an ensemble of loosely connected oppositional practices, underpinned both by a highly eclectic methodology of ‘cultural embattlement’... and by an aesthetic of largely textualised, partly localised resistance” (p. 6). Postcoloniality, on the other hand, which Huggan identifies as a function of postmodernity, describes a regime of value pertaining to symbolic and material exchange “in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed” (p. 6). As “a value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange”, Huggan notes the way in which, within its sphere:

[v]alue is constructed through global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally ‘othered’ goods. Postcoloniality’s regime of value is implicitly assimilative and market-driven: it regulates the value-equivalence of putatively marginal products in the global marketplace. (p. 6)

Noting that postcolonialism’s own “politics of value” is quite obviously opposed to such global processes of commodification, Huggan observes the way in which “these two apparently conflicting regimes of value” are nevertheless, or have become, mutually entangled (p. 6). Moreover, his entire critique is aimed at showing what happens when putatively marginal discourses and products, valued as loci of “resistance to socially imposed standards and coercive norms” (p. 20), “arrive” at the centre: although they continue to be valued there—and not in

spite of, but precisely because of their opposition to its own logic of value—they become, as it were, accommodated to it: denuded of any genuine difference that may challenge the centre.

What is most important here for my purposes is Huggan's analysis of the mechanism through which this occurs: commodity fetishism, which—quite revealingly—Huggan argues “links up with earlier forms of exoticist representation, arguably becoming the postmodern version of exoticist mystique” (p. 18); and while it is impossible to provide a much deeper analysis of either commodity fetishism or exoticism here, what I do want to highlight (something that Huggan does not explicitly discuss) is the way in which what we might refer to as the “semiotic structure” of the fetishised commodity reflects not only the form that culturally “othered” goods assume when they reach the market—and here specifically, the sort of visual artworks of Iranian artists that I shall discuss below—but also how this structure is also often mirrored in their own visual language. That is, assuming the classic Marxian formulation of commodity fetishism, which, as Huggan summarises, “describes the veiling of the material circumstances under which commodities are produced and consumed”, and, through a process “mystification... the illusion of the severance of the finished work from its process of production” (p. 18), what is striking is the way in which many of these works ironically—which is to say, knowingly—point to their very status as (exotic, fetishised) commodities through their own visibility. Recalling Frederic Jameson's (1991, p. x) well-known characterisation of postmodernism as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process”, many of these works might be read as submitting to this process—as embracing their own “simulacral” reality; and I suggest that this is perhaps one of the reasons for their appeal and success: they act as a mirror, or one side of a semiotic circuit, reflecting the desires of a viewer who seeks authenticity without, perhaps, fully believing in it.

A clear example of this employed in many of these works is their embracing what Huggan calls (following Appadurai) an “aesthetics of diversion” (p. 16). Noting that under the aegis of postmodern “exoticism” the allure and the value of the exotic everyday object is “attendant upon its diversion”, or the “placing [of such] objects and things in unlikely contexts” (p. 16)—a phenomenon that describes not only the appeal of World art and music, but equally current hipster fashion trends—what is striking, again, is the way that many works of visual artists encode this way of seeing in their works, embracing the politics of diversion and display in the very way they combine their very visual signs, not only anticipating but already suggesting their own essentially disconnected reality.

That is, it is not simply that as cultural commodities these artworks (because they contain specific cultural signifiers) appear detached from their original cultural contexts; often, such works point within themselves, through their visibility, to their own decontextualised reality.

Thus, clashing cultural signifiers or culturally-specific elements are often combined in a way that suggests—quite conspicuously—their incompatibility: a veil-clad woman peers out of her “anachronistic” covering wearing the superficial signs of the modern Western fashion-loving woman—high-heel shoes, make up, the plaster aftermath of a nose job—or brandishing recognisable tokens of their modernity: a coke can or a mobile phone. In this way, a collision of heterogenous but clearly recognisable elements, each of them highly typified, combine in different works to communicate different meanings, but many of them broadly sharing a similar theme to do with a singular subject, “the contemporary Iranian women”—her being caught between tradition and modernity, or somewhere beneath the real and symbolic weight of the veil.

So, for example, in one of her most well-known series, *Like Every Day* (2000-2001), Shadi Ghadirian humorously depicts Iranian women using home utensils shrouded in colourful patterned fabric (clearly recalling the image of the *chador*), “ironically exaggerating misogynist typecasts” related to their assigned roles as domestic “slaves” in order to challenge their negative stereotyping (Saatchi Gallery, n.d.). Similarly, in her *Ghajar* series (1998-1999), Ghadirian recreates Ghajar-era portraits of Iranian women—each of them “jarringly interrupted by the presence of contemporary products—a phone, boom-box, Hoover,” in order “to describe a contemporary Iranian female experience of existing as if outside of time” while “pointing to a culture clash of tradition and progress”. Each of the women, too, is defiant; they “stare out from the photos with an unnerving directness, detached from their environment, and confident within themselves” (Saatchi Gallery, n.d.).

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**Figure 5.1** Shadafarin Ghadirian (2002), *Like Every Day* [Photography]



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**Figure 5.2** Shadafarin Ghadirian (1998), Qajar #3 [Gelatin silver print]

Similarly, in her series *Miss Hybrid* (2008), Shirin Ali-Abadi presents us with typified images of young Iranian women displaying the current fashion trends in order to capture “the aesthetic nuances that shape, reshape and reinvent the identity of the new Iranian girl”. She shows how these women, “under the auspice of the Islamic veil”, transform themselves by means of cosmetic surgery and other acts of self-beautification—all of which “can be regarded as a healthy exercise in cultural rebellion and global integration” (Landscape Stories, 2014).

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**Figure 5.3** Shirian Aliabadi (2008), Miss Hybrid #3 [Photography]

Thus, as a recurring image in contemporary Iranian art, this figure—the female Iranian subject—has come to serve quite literally as an ideological battleground. And this is right, for in Iran today, as in previous generations, women have often found themselves caught in the centre

between different competing forces. None of this can be questioned, nor the fact that an Iranian (female) artist might seek to explore these issues through the medium of their practice. Furthermore, each of these works that I have just mentioned—and others that might be grouped alongside them—diverge in important ways both as regards their specific concerns and modes of visualising their subjects, and nothing that I have said is meant to preclude or stand for a deeper and more engaged reading of them. But again, the specific question that I am asking is not about these issues as such, but rather about why it is that outside Iran a particular style of art-making—and one focused on a fairly narrow range of thematic concerns—has been embraced so one-sidedly, and so (arguably) come to be seen as representative of Iranian art. In other words, I am in the first place interested in why the market has tended to prefer those works that encode their subject in a particular way, employing a commodified language in the fairly precise sense that I discussed a moment ago: the use of recognisable or readily decodable signs of cultural difference which nevertheless appear, as it were, floating, detached from their referents.

One reason for this might be easy to find: it is simply indicative of a trend or style of art-making that is (or was) more widely used and recognised, in part perhaps because it reflects our postmodern condition, or concerns having to do with the “crisis” of meaning and representation—questions about the unitary subject and the questioning of master narratives, and so on. In this light, it is crucial to observe here, that postcolonialism and postmodernism do both share many of the same formal and thematic concerns. In her classic article “‘Circling the Downspout of Empire’: post-colonialism and postmodernism”, for example, the theorist Linda Hutcheon (1989) notes that both are—albeit in different ways—obviously concerned with issues to do with marginality, or marginalisation, challenging claims to different forms of universality and so on, and often place questions about “textual gaps in the foreground”, even though “their sites of production differ” (p. 151). Furthermore, both embrace “discursive strategies like irony and allegory”, in which the former specifically is employed as a “trope of doubleness”—a “split discourse which has the potential to subvert from within” (p. 154). About this “mode of address”, Hutcheon notes the way in which irony becomes

a popular rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time. Its inherent semantic and structural doubleness also makes it a most convenient trope for the paradoxical dualities of both post-modern complicitous critique and post-colonial doubled identity and history. (p. 154)

Although Hutcheon is here specifically discussing the field of postcolonial literary production, and therefore those discourses that have been shaped by and sought in part to contend with the colonial imposition of an imperial culture, it is arguable that Iranian visual artists are engaged in

a similar project of negotiating their dual history, seeking ways to subvert a dominant culture from within. That includes for many Iranian artists not only the weight of local (Islamist) forces that came to the fore in the post-Revolutionary period, but also the cultural and political hegemony of the West, or the forces that continue to construct Iran as an other. Again, it might be said that it is their shared concern with “doubleness” (of identity, history and so on) that unites the postcolonial and contemporary Iranian experience on the one hand, and the latter to postmodernism as a form of (cultural) “critique” and art-making, and as a style of thought on the other—their “twofold vision”. Similarly, both are engaged in ways of disrupting—of revolting against—attempts to enforce cultural sameness through the revalorisation of marginality or difference. But notably too, and as Hutcheon (1989, p. 154) notes, this struggle—the attempt on both sides to counter a dominant pattern—is nevertheless one that occurs *within* the dominant paradigm; and it is for this reason that irony or parody and other “split discourses” become especially relevant as vehicles not only for the expression of this condition—of marginality—but also as tools of subversion. Hutcheon then crucially points to the fact that, as forms of critique, they are each in some way (albeit in different ways) complicit in the very cultural dominants that they seek to challenge—just as Hellen Tiffin (1988) had earlier noted the way in which postcolonial literature is inevitably “informed by the imperial vision” (p. 172). Furthermore, while Hutcheon and others have been careful to note that postcolonial criticism differs from many expressions of postmodernism in this sense at least, that it has a more distinct political agenda—or as Huggan (2001, p. 6) observes, in that it “does not, or at least does not aim to, share [postmodernism’s] somewhat irresponsible lack of commitment, its self-regarding obsession with play”—what she perhaps fails to draw out is that regardless of the political or other intention that stands behind it, the very language of postcolonial artistic production unfortunately makes it indistinguishable from the latter (postmodernism) much of the time—that is, from an audience perspective.

Thus—and returning to my main focus—it might be argued that the sort self-reflexivity and (often) ironic forms of expression through which many Iranian artists have sought to explore and to critique questions about their contested identity, the perceived imposition of cultural norms are caught up in this very sort of dilemma. That is, a legitimate criticism of many of their works is that they might be seen as indirectly—and often unintentionally—reinforcing the very structures that they oppose. So, speaking about the select use of the veil in particular in the works of Shadi Ghadirian, Shirin Ali Abadi and other Iranian artists, Barbad Golshiri (2009) contends that they “perpetuate the dominant image in a very direct way...”; that is, they “take advantage of doxa and hegemony and submit to it in the name of subversion”. More concretely,

though somewhat simplistically, Golshiri notes the curious way in which the visual statements in these works are often, in a sense, indistinguishable from the ideological statements they are seeking to subvert. Thus, Ghadirian's *Ghajar* series "embraces 'our anachronistic life' as common wisdom does: Westoxication"—a visual statement that is intended ironically here, but reflecting a view that is, nevertheless, shared by the ministry of culture in Iran. Similarly, Golshiri writes that

[the] way Neshat treats the chador is the way the culture factory of the Islamic Republic beautifies its restrictions; they too aestheticize the veil in their murals, posters, and slogans. For them, a woman in a veil is like a pearl in its shell.

Whether or not Golshiri is right that these artists are guilty of "aestheticizing stereotypes", the more fundamental question concerns the way in which such artworks, employing similar visual strategies to those described in order to communicate locally or culturally specific knowledge, are all-too-easily read by non-local audiences. More broadly, the question concerns whether such visual strategies employing split discourses are indeed capable of challenging dominant narratives from within, supposing that this is at least one of their aims.

Here, then, we arrive once more at Huggan's competing "regimes of value", discussed earlier. Again, Huggan points to the way in which the language of resistance is so easily manipulated and consumed once it encounters the value-regulating mechanisms underlying systems of commodity exchange; and regarding the circulation of works of Iranian artists outside Iran specifically, what the preceding analysis was intended to show was that it is not merely the reception of marginal or culturally-othered goods within the global art scene that is relevant here, but their very visual language or way of encoding certain information, and indeed the fact that it is this very language that explains their excessive visibility.

In connection with this point, it is worth highlighting too that it is not only the (narrowly understood) political or oppositional content of such works that tends to be compromised by this assimilative tendency of the market but also the very strategy of highlighting or communicating cultural difference. Here, recalling Huggan's (2001) crucial observation that commodity fetishism "links up with earlier forms of exoticist representation" (p. 18), it could be argued that the visibility or success of certain works of Iranian artists outside Iran has also to be explained by their being so suited to being re-read or valued within the structures of certain exoticist modes of production. Noting that exoticism is "in one sense, a control mechanism of cultural translation which relays the other inexorably back again to the same" (p. 14), Huggan describes how "the exotic functions dialectically as a symbolic system, domesticating the foreign, the culturally different and the extraordinary" (p. 14)—an attempt to "to ensure the availability

of the margins for the mainstream” whilst “keeping it out of harmful reach” (p. 23) through assigning new but predictable meanings to the unfamiliar, or a way of enriching the market without threatening its abiding logic. So, as Huggan writes, exoticism “in this context, might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity,” such that “[w]ithin this circuit, the strange and the familiar, as well as the relation between them, may be receded to serve different, even contradictory, political needs and ends” (p. 13).

It must be emphasised then that the frequent labelling of certain works of Iranian artists as “exotic” or “stereotyping” (a charge often thrown about by other Iranian critics or artists) is, perhaps, unfair; for as the preceding points suggest, what is considered typical or exotic describes in the first place a system or mode of perception, and only secondarily—and quite vaguely—the object that might exude this sense to a particular viewer or class of viewers. Moreover, it is in some sense inevitable that an artwork incorporating locally or culturally specific elements will be, to different degrees, read or viewed in this way (which is to say, if not mis-read, then at least approached in way that is perhaps destined to result in an impoverished or merely surface reading). To take a rather obvious example: an Iranian artist may choose to incorporate some form of Persian writing in one of her artworks, both as a vehicle of concrete expression and in light of the centuries-long practice in Iran (as in other Islamicate societies) of using calligraphy in different graphic media. But since Persian writing is indecipherable, if not unrecognisable, to most Western viewers, it may appear strangely familiar to them—which is precisely to say, exotic—and even stereotypical, but not legible as such. Were it actually legible to them, it would perhaps appear as exotic as their own English writing.

This points to a genuine dilemma for Iranian artists then—as indeed for any marginal artist engaged in communicating local or culturally specific knowledge to non-local audiences. For there is nothing at all wrong with either seeking or employing strategies to encode such knowledge in a way that is more likely to be familiar to non-local audiences; and yet to do so risks not only inviting the criticism of other local critics or artists, but also the real possibility that these strategies will only serve to reinforce either the dominant narratives that they might be used to oppose or the underlying mechanisms through which cultural difference and oppositional discourses are frequently assimilated to the logic of the market.

### 5.3 A mirror and screen

In this section, I shall discuss how some of the concerns discussed above are related to the reception of many of those artworks in which images of veiled female subjects appear prominently, and how this overlaps with issues about the politics of representation or the contested status of the identity of women of Islamic background, including how they are perceived in the West. For as many critics have observed, in recent decades, images of veiled women have been constantly reappearing in contemporary art exhibitions that are aimed at promoting what is often vaguely referred to as “contemporary art from the Middle East”. Indeed, the veil has arguably come to serve—particularly in the West—as a recurrent and rather fixed signifier of female Islamic or even Iranian or Middle Eastern identity.

A typical criticism directed at the uses of images of the veil (or the veiled female subject) in visual artworks is that it tends to show Islamic women as a singular, monolithic group—as an identical and homogenous group of “victims”. As a visual signifier and marker of cultural identity, it is argued, the veil envelops its subjects in too severe a manner, eclipsing the local and personal identities of those who embrace it (or those whom it embraces). At the same time, a possible counter-criticism is that it is Islamic veiling as a practice that is really responsible for erasing women’s identities; and so an artist who chooses to depict the veil in this way has simply succeed in communicating its reality.

Be this as it may, what I am more concerned to show in this section is the way in which such visual representations may feed into and support dominant attitudes about non-Western women and their locality, positioning them in relatively fixed ways and as a semi-real category at best. Once again, in the context that I am discussing, the question about what an artist may have intended to communicate in presenting its subject in this way is secondary; the more important point is rather how these visual codes interact with the ideological framing of these subjects. For as just indicated, in the West the veil has arguably come to occupy the paradoxical, but not inconsistent position of a sort of super sign; a sign that is characterised by its carrying both an excess and paucity of meaning. That is, it tends to say too much and too little at the same time, and often evokes different and contradictory perceptions for different subjects, and even for the same subjects at the same time: fear or horror; anger or sympathy; community, or solidarity; and different registers of desire.

Much of this has to do with the fact that the veil itself has served, in highly different ways and contexts, as real and symbolic site in different struggles among women from the Middle East. Thus, as Fadwa El Guindi (quoted in Cichocki, 2008) writes:

Few items of clothing have been as disputed and as charged with political meaning as the veil worn by Muslim women. It is a complex symbol: female emancipation can be denoted by either wearing it or removing it; the veil can acquire both secular and religious meaning in that it either denotes resistance to colonization, or ties with the Islamic tradition.

But equally too the veil has more and more come to acquire different (and polarised) meanings for different (Western) viewers—perceptions that reflect changing attitudes towards the Muslims and other groups in the Middle East, both in response to changing world events as well as broader political and discursive concerns. Here then my aim is to examine briefly the way in which the very presence of this recurring image in the works of Iranian (and other) artists may serve to simply reinforce or reflect back different viewer interests or preconceptions regarding their subjects, regardless of the intention of the artist. More specifically, my aim is to connect such reflected readings (which may be more or less benign) and a certain way of visually encoding the veil—its excessive visibility.

By way of example, we might consider Shahram Entekhabi's series *Islamic Vogue* (2001-2005), which aims to “openly [confront] the question of visibility and Islamic alienation”, as well as European perceptions about the veil (which has become a topic of security debate, and which is often seen “as a symbol of the subjugation of women in the name of religion”) while also pointing out its close ties to Muslim identity, and so, for Muslim women in Europe, its focal importance in their experiences of (often forced ) cultural assimilation (Entekhabi, n.d.). In this series, Entekhabi uses paint and permanent marker to draw “chadors” on a number of Vogue Magazine images of women to confront us with these issues, while also questioning the manner in which such media images, reflecting Western tastes, dictate our ideas of beauty and fashion (Entekhabi, n.d.).

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**Figure 5.4** Shahram Entekhabi (2001-2005), *Islamic Vogue*  
[Photography]

Thus, what Entekhabi's work shares in common with some of those discussed earlier is not only a surface level of visual play or juxtaposition that is in some way designed to disrupt our expectations, but also an overlapping concern with issues to do with the self-perception and contested identity of a relatively fixed category of subjects: "contemporary Iranian" or "Islamic" women. Furthermore, what it also shares in common with them is its concern with the different gazes directed at these groups: how a certain "we" or "they" perceive ourselves/themselves, or how an "Other" perceives them/us, and using a sort of knowing humour to critique these perceptions. But as described earlier, this effect is achieved in one way only through provisionally submitting to, or admitting, the very stereotyped image that it seeks to parody or invert. Again, this is just irony of course, and the formula for most joke-telling whose humour depends on disrupting our expectations apropos some well-known racial or other stereotype. But what is notable, in the first place, is the fact that the intended effects of such visual strategies are so unstable despite operating within a relatively closed circuit of meaning. So, for example, Entekhabi's images can in one way be read as a straightforward commentary on the stupid irrationality of veiling as much as the irrational fear it provokes. And yes, this is the point;



but only for those who get the joke. At the ideological extremes where irony is lacking, then, both the culture warriors and Islamists will likely nod in agreement, though for entirely different reasons. So once more, this is not to discourage such visual strategies, but simply to say that as an informational strategy, it is perhaps only likely to achieve its effect among those who already know.

Now it is true that only the dullest readers are likely to miss the “intended” message in this work; but from another point of view, it could be argued that this very strategy dulls the senses in another way, or compromises any possible oppositional message it might contain, precisely because its language is so suited to commodification as earlier described. So, because the work never really rises above the plane of “established” meaning, it might be argued that the possible effects it might achieve are somewhat compromised by a sense of playful knowingness that dilutes its message.

Furthermore, a similar result may occur when visual or informational strategies such as this are employed not in the context of making a super-commentary on the different “outsider” attitudes or gazes directed towards the veiled subject but in expressing an artist’s own personal experience of the limiting and oppressive effects of living beneath, or in the midst of, the veil. More specifically, by presenting the veiled female subject in a highly typified way that foregrounds certain attributes associated with an individual’s own perception and experiences, it may result in—whether this is intended or not—an artwork’s being read as just such a commentary, and one carrying more weight because of its personal/experiential dimension. But here too, this “commentary” may simply feed into and support certain pre-existing assumptions held by different viewers, thus reproducing systems of knowledge that discursively position different subjects in different (binarily opposed) ways. That is, when such an artwork itself employs fairly straightforward oppositions (again, involving juxtaposition and playing on audience knowledge/expectation and so on) and super-saturated symbols that are used to identify different categories, they may invite intended or unintended politicised commentary. And while such politicised readings of a work of art (their merely confirming viewer biases, for example) are always prone to emerge no matter how an artist treats their subject, my argument is that a strategy which involves using highly typical representations of their subjects and binary oppositions to play ironically on audience knowledge and expectation leads to the danger not of misreading, but of never really escaping a closed circuit of “truth”, precisely because an “ironic” sense is always parasitic on (since it presupposes) a grasp of something’s literal meaning. Rather than departing from the substantial sense of what we already know, what is more likely to be perceived as “novel” in the work of art employing stereotypes is largely the effect of their

collision. As such, despite seemingly inverting or confronting our expectations, what they often produce—not incidentally but as a result of their internal logic—is simply shock, not knowledge. But veiled by a sense of irony.

Something similar may also result when an artist relies not on stereotypes as such, but rather a heavy use of symbolic “metaphors” to describe either a personal or general experience, though because as signs they may have multiple concrete referents, they are likely to be read not only metaphorically but literally—or vaguely both at the same time. Here, the danger is that the boundary between the sign (in its multiple functions) and the referent may be lost sight of, or that the former may carry an excess of meaning, so that the “particularity” of its referents is crushed under the weight of metaphor.

A particularly strong example of this is arguably found in the Australian-based Iranian artist Nasim Nasr’s work *Women in Shadow* (2011), which incorporates similar elements to those found in her previous work such as *Unveiling the Veil* (2010), *Erasure* (2010), and *Rebirth* (2009). As part of *Women in Shadow*, Nasr staged a “fashion” show featuring catwalk models clad in black chadors and sporting heavy black, gothic-looking eye makeup. Wearing otherwise plain though coldly haunting faces, the models slowly and ominously walked up and down the catwalk, occasionally posing between the two facing groups of audience members, split by gender; the only other “incongruous” element about their attire being their high-heel shoes, just visible below their chadors, which serve as the only visual link between these models and their glamorous/commercial setting—everything else appearing out of place, precisely because of our expectations.

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**Figure 5.5** Nasim Nasr (2011), *Women in Shadow*  
[Installation/performance]

Exploring issues to do with cultural identity, the “chador”, “erasure”, “the gaze” and “shadow”, while also communicating her contrasting experiences as a young women living in Iran and Australia, Nasr notes that through her practice in general—and specifically in the context of this series—she “seeks to represent not only the socio-cultural invisibility of women in Iran but also their disempowerment, that fades them into shadow” (Nasr, 2014). Commenting on the title of this work she writes, “By ‘shadow’ I mean suppression, left in darkness, not having a recognised history, and being silenced without visibility” (Nasr, 2011). Thus, while Nasr is careful to note that this work is ostensibly about her own experience, the viewer is naturally inclined—and encouraged—to read this work, whether directly or indirectly, as a strong critique of the practice of veiling, and as a portrait of the plight of Iranian women more generally; and once more, because of the fairly straightforward coding of its subject, utilising binary oppositions and so on, it lends itself to being read just in this way—as a clear political and social commentary with a fairly recognisable cast of heroes and villains, and monsters.

This reading is fully corroborated too by Professor Catherine Speck (2011), who contributed a piece for the exhibition programme. She observes:

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ushered in an Islamic State, and its associated fundamentalist codes immediately impacted upon women, intellectuals, artists and free thinking citizens. Women were ordered to wear the chador when out of doors, and inside the home in front of strangers. Nasr's performative art speaks on behalf of women currently living in Iran who have to observe this fundamentalist dress code, and to Iranian émigrés who carry the cultural memory of being disenfranchised. (p. 9)

Speck here provides the reader/viewer with a discursive reminder supporting Nasr's visual suggestion that the chador, specifically, is an all-embracing and suffocating reality in Iran, suggesting erroneously—or without qualification—that (all?) “women currently living Iran” are still “ordered to wear the chador when out of doors” (p. 9), when in fact the fundamentalist dress code that applies is, while still being fundamentalist, not in fact the chador. But it makes a more striking image, and the uninformed reader is not likely to notice, even though someone who is forced to wear one certainly would. Furthermore, Speck has her cast of heroes and villains play their familiar roles. After commenting on the way in which this dress code “fundamentally disempowers women”, leading to their “loss of freedom, loss of identity and loss of corporeal presence”, she observes:

Women in Iran, as in other oppressive regimes, have negotiated ways around these codes and, in finding some sense of dignity, have turned their gaze onto their own bodies and what lies beneath their overbearing covering. Sexy underwear, high-heel shoes, well made-up eyes that peer out from the chador and designer jeans are all a part of the ‘secret wardrobe’. (p. 9)

Nevermind that this “secret wardrobe” is, curiously, described in terms well suited to another kind of objectifying male gaze; this statement corroborates in words another reading of Nasr's work that lies just beneath the surface: by becoming “like” the ideal fashion-loving Western woman, the uniformly oppressed Muslim woman (who is identical to all other Muslim women) shall escape her victim status.

Furthermore, what is striking is that the visual metaphor that is used to carry this meaning/message—or one side of the binary opposition that it sets up: the black chador—is caught between its purely symbolic and concrete designation. The chador (especially the black chador), that is, is just one of the concrete expressions that veiling takes in Iranian society; but it is a powerful visual metaphor that for many captures the oppressive reality of veiling, period. Here, in *Women in Shadow*, it would not have suited Nasr's aims to portray her veiled subjects in the way that, say, Ali-Abadi does in *Miss Hybrid*, where the *hejab* appears out of place, to be sure, but more quirky than suffocating. And this is right, because it is how Nasr experienced it. But again, since that experience is being communicated here, at least in part, metaphorically,

albeit through the medium of a concrete and historically/locally specific (and recognisable) image, it is notable that this artwork is only able to communicate its meaning through a kind of symbolic violence that mirrors, in a way, the same violence it opposes: its erasing difference. That is, the black chador is used to locate and to communicate semi-metaphorically a personal and shared experience, and one that is associated with the experience of veiling as such (and not only wearing the chador, since it is not in fact a universal reality in Iran) through one person's eyes. But since this metaphor corresponds, albeit in an exaggerated, sensationalised way, to a limited but concrete historical reality, it is likely—and not accidentally—to be read as a pointed commentary. As a concrete symbol, it serves to locate a particular group; then as metaphor, it violently embraces (by forcing them into it) an entire category of women; and finally, it demonises them.

Naturally this will happen to different degrees among different audiences—those possessing different levels or varieties of knowledge and experience in relation to such works' subject matter. And whether or not they are read as targeted commentaries or as records of personal experience (which different viewers will recognise/identify with in different ways), it does raise a question about the intended or unintended effects that may be produced by such works among different audiences and in different contexts. For example, an Iranian woman who has experienced living under Iran's restrictive laws may identify strongly with the personal experience communicated in *Women in Shadow* (and for her it may even serve as a form of therapy), while for an audience member who has not, it will at best simulate part of that experience, and perhaps serve more as a commentary. But in this case, we may ask whether the particular formula used to simulate this experience—and if it is read in this way, the “knowledge” that it ostensibly provides—might not have other unintended effects.

Obviously, one danger in communicating in this way is that, lacking the same knowledge as the Iranian viewer, this “simulation” may be taken for reality, and as such too simplistically. Or it may be argued that the reality just is as simplistic as the simulation. But that is not only to gloss over the complex social and historical realities that surround the veil in its myriad expressions, given that it has occupied different positions at different times (before and after the Revolution); at the same time, since the picture that it paints of the predicament of Iranian women today is presented in purely Manichean terms, this simulation (involving the viewer in a particularly strong way, and therefore providing a kind of intimate knowledge) might contribute to a false sense of having “mastered” its subject. In slightly different terms, such ways of representing the veiled female subject might simply reinforce their ideological framing as victims. For example, as Hamid Dabashi (2015) has recently written about Shirin Neshat's works:

In a time when cliché conceptualisation of “Muslim women” or fetishised conceptions of “veiling” is integral to a globalised “war on terror”, all predicated on the ludicrous notion that Muslim women need saving from Muslim men, especially by white men in military uniform (to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak’s apt phrase), works such as Shirin Neshat’s become easy prey to abusive encounters.

Furthermore, it could be argued that such representations both reflect and hence reproduce an image of Muslim women as “other” in the precise sense of the term referring to the formation of subjectivity, and so precisely in the way that such representations functioned within the context of colonial discourses. That is, granting that it is through the construction of an other (like a mirror image of the self) that the subject discovers itself as a separate subject, thereby gaining self-awareness and mastery, it might be argued that these images function in the context of their wider circulation in the West in much the same way that they have always functioned within colonial discourses—but with a spin. For while the latter-day construction of the female Muslim as uniformly “oppressed” still has everything to do with the ideological mechanisms through which various Western powers justify their military excursions into the Middle East, it has to be noted too that—again, just as in earlier colonial discourses—such discourses operate on a much more intimate level as well. That is, recalling the very precise sense in which, as Edward Said (2003) notes, Western representations of the “Orient” (which is always described in negative terms that discursively construct the West as superior) have historically been vital in helping the West not only to “control” the latter, but also in defining, and thereby gaining “knowledge” about itself, by providing “its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience” (p. 2), it might be argued that for many Western individuals—and perhaps Western women especially—these images today serve a similar function. In their reflected surface, that is—or beneath the veil—the “ideal” Western viewer discovers herself: modern, fashion loving, sexually free, in control of her own body, she becomes the norm or referent in relation to the struggles of these Muslim women—the ideal that they should strive to become. In this way she comes to occupy a superior but (perhaps) sympathetic position towards the “oppressed” othered female subject; and so too then in the act of viewing or choosing to promote the sort of works that codify this relationship, the Western agent might not only be emboldened by granting the artist (or its subject) a sort of real or imagined freedom through her own act of will; for her, this sublimated act of viewing may also result in a sort of veiling of the circumstances surrounding her own lack of freedom.

Standing back, a less contentious but still crucial point, perhaps, is one that the transnational feminist Chandara Monhanty (1988) raised in her famous article, “Under Western Eyes”. Questioning the tacitly hierarchical language that is often found in Western feminist literature, and which often presents all third world women as an identical group of victims, she notes the

way in which Western feminism might be seen as enacting another kind of discursive colonisation that simply affirms the superiority of the Western female subject. Thus Mohanty asks: “What happens when this assumption of ‘women as an oppressed group’ is situated in the context of Western feminist writing about third world women?” Her answer: “Western feminists alone become the true ‘subjects’ of this counter-history. Third world women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their ‘object’ status” (1988, p. 351).

## 5.4 Summary

My primary concern here has been to explore some overarching questions about how an artist of marginal cultural background such as myself who is engaged in producing art that aims to communicate both local and global concerns to a non-local audience should approach her creative practice given that she is destined to find herself pulled in opposing directions, or caught between different competing forces or interests at different times. As a site of cultural translation, that is, the non-Western artist who is engaged in making work that is destined to be read by a Western audience, she must not only contend with the immediate problems of finding ways to speak in a global language about the local, nor yet simply the fact that this global language is still in some ways parochially owned by the West, in the sense that Iranian and other artists are still often faced with the dilemma of having “to choose between ‘derivative’ production (never considered as good as the European model) or [displaying]... one’s otherness” (Keshmirshekan 2010, p. 499); in addition, as I have argued here, she also faces the problem that the language that she may find herself speaking is, in a very real sense, an imperial one.

To explore how a non-Western artist such as myself might seek to respond critically and visually to this situation through her art, I produced a major body of work (completed in 2014) that sought to address many of these issues. In this series, *Under Western Eyes*, my main aim was not to correct this situation through presenting an ostensibly “truer” image and representation of the female Muslim or Iranian subject, but rather to mirror back audience expectation (re-employing many of the familiar tropes described above in exaggerated and ironic fashion) in order to highlight the way in which such images function within a market in which such cultural goods both function as commodities and, more problematically, reflect/reproduce the ideological positioning of their (non-Western) subjects vis-à-vis their (Western) audiences.

In the following chapter, I will present a summary and analysis of the process of making this work.





## 6 UNDER WESTERN EYES (2014)

*Under Western Eyes* is a series of digitally manipulated photographs, which attempts to criticise the continual representation of Islamic women in the contemporary art world as veiled, subjugated and suppressed. The veil—seen as a sort of forced enclosure—has become the dominant mode of representing Islamic women in the West and it either serves as a symbol and tool of oppression, or is celebrated as an exotic commodity. Through creating these images, I intend to emphasise the reductive interpretation of the identity of Muslim women in the West and praising of such imagery as an attitude bound up with aspects of exoticism.

**Artist statement**  
*Under Western Eyes* (2014)

### 6.1 Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, the process of making *In-Between Spaces* led me to focus more and more on issues of representation and the way in which the dominant representations of non-Western subjects in the West are bound up with (neo)colonial discourses. In this way, my creative arts research turned towards understanding how and why so many works of non-Western artists (and especially Iranian artists) that achieved significant recognition in the West appeared to deal with a few stock themes, all communicated in highly typical fashion (that is, employing many of the same signifiers, and a similar visual language) and generally coalescing around a single image: that of the veiled female Muslim subject.

As analysed at length in the previous chapter, the success of these artworks may be explained both in terms of their postmodern exotic appeal and, more problematically, the ideological positioning of the female Islamic subject as inferior in relation to the ideal Western viewer. During the present stage of my creative arts research, then, I set out to make a series of images critiquing both the constant circulation in the West of stereotyped images of the female Muslim subject as well as the underlying discursive structures that give rise to this situation.

The resulting work, titled *Under Western Eyes*, is a series of nine digitally manipulated photographs that employ a pop-art visual language to depict, in a highly stylised way, images of veiled Muslim women surrounded by signs of modern Western fashion and consumption. In depicting this singular subject in this way, my basic aim was to mirror back the (Western) viewer's assumptions and desires in relation to such images: that is, their status as exoticised

commodities in the precise sense examined in the preceding chapter. The highly simulacral and cartoon-ish character of the images is meant to underscore the hyperreality of such images of the exotic other today—the fact that such images are like signs without referents.

## 6.2 Visual formula and technical aspects

In setting out to make the series ‘Under Western Eyes, then, my first aim was to develop a visual regime and language that would communicate all of these concerns immediately, or directly on the surface, so that it would be clear to the viewer that the resulting images were intended entirely as a critique of the nature and function of representational codes rather than being yet another attempt to communicate the “truth” of the situation of Islamic women.

Towards this end, I first began researching and gathering information about the work of those Iranian or Middle Eastern artists generally whose works had achieved high visibility in the West and seemed to be communicating in some way themes to do with the plight of Islamic female subject. These included works by Shirin Neshat, Shahram Entekhabi, Shadi Ghadirian, Lala Essayedi, Majida Khattari, Niloufar Banisadr, Nasim Nasr, Parastou Forouhar, Shirin Aliabadi and many more.

I started listing all the recurring themes and visual elements that were used in the works of these artists. These included: the veil or the chador, Persian/Islamic calligraphy, images of domesticity, symbols indicating the tension between tradition and modernity, Islamic signifiers, and images of violence (a gun), alongside visual elements indicating the reality of women beneath the forced enclosure of the veil (sexual, secretly fashion loving, and rebellious).

My initial idea was to make a series of self-portraits using a photo-collage technique to combine all the above themes together in an exaggerated and humoristic language. Again, this strategy was intended to avoid my images being read (like the works I was responding to) as communicating another narrative about the suppression of Islamic women. As such, I felt that using humor and removing the heaviness often associated with the image of the veiled woman would help me to highlight the message of the work (being about the market for these works rather than the truth of their representations).

At first I started making self-portraits in my studio, employing all the visual elements used in the works of the artists mentioned above, in a bold and direct language. I wanted the audience to recognise those elements from the images that they’ve seen before. I used a Chroma-Key backdrop (green screen) so that I could manipulate my images in Photoshop (changing the background colour or combining different images together to produce a collage).

I soon realised though that the presence of the veil in the images I was taking had so much power and retained so many of those negative connotations that they continued to create the same sense that I was trying to avoid (suggesting suppression, threat and danger). My intended message was getting lost under the dark shadow of the pre-existing meanings that have tended to surround and attach themselves to the veil, so this initial attempt turned out to be a shabby replication of the very same images that I was aiming to criticise.



**Figure 6.1** Hoda Afshar (2010), Untitled [Digital photograph]. Studio experimentation for *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.2** Hoda Afshar (2010), Untitled [Digital photograph].  
Studio experimentation for *Under Western Eyes* series.

So I started all over again. I focused on the idea that the audience that I was making the work for was a Western audience, and began to think more about this strategy of mirroring back the expectations and desires of the viewer to highlight the representational codes that regulate the meanings of such images. I thought about what I wanted to say to this audience and came to feel that, in order to communicate this precise meaning, I would have to “speak” in a language that was familiar and obvious. So I started researching the work of artists who are known for making political art that criticises systems of representation and/or the market for culturally othered goods.

One of my major inspirations who influenced the resulting work was the Aboriginal artist and activist Richard Bell—especially his image “Aboriginal Art Is a White Thing”. In a theorem that Bell wrote in 2002 (before winning the 20th National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2003 for this work) he describes:

Aboriginal Art has become a product of the times. A commodity. The result of a concerted and sustained marketing strategy, albeit, one that has been loose and uncoordinated. There is no Aboriginal Art Industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. The key players in that industry are not Aboriginals. They are mostly White people whose areas of expertise are in the fields of Anthropology and “Western Art”.

To communicate this idea in his work, Bell used Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art styles to point to the commodification of Aboriginal art and identity through the Western art market.

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**Figure 6.3** Richard Bell (2003), *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorum)*, or *Aboriginal Art It's a White Thing* [Acrylic on canvas]

This was a great point of reference for me, since also I found Pop Art the most effective aesthetic for this project. This is because the visual style of Pop Art draws heavily on aspects of popular culture and commercial image-making techniques in order to portray their powerful impact on contemporary life. The visual elements employed become like the iconography of today, directly referencing the mass produced nature of images as commodities, while downplaying the originality of the artist in producing a piece of art.

These characteristics of Pop Art—its striking and simply visual vocabulary, the use of recognisable elements and primary colours, its superficiality, and its close ties to fashion, glamour, capitalism and irony—were what I found most relevant to the theme of my work, and so I decided to reference this language heavily in my second attempt at making the images for the *Under Western Eyes* series. So I started adding new layers of color and pattern in Photoshop to the images that I made during my earlier attempts. I borrowed multiple visual languages used by some of the most well-known Pop Art figures such as Roy Lichtenstein (his comic strips and dots), Andy Warhol (his distinctive colour palette and aesthetic), and Richard Hamilton (his photo-collage technique), and combined them all together.



**Figure 6.4** Hoda Afshar (2010), Untitled [Digital photographs]. Studio experimentation for *Under Western Eyes* series.

The results of these second attempts, though, were overly photoo-shopped images that seemed to be both aesthetically and conceptually confused and unresolved. I was trying to say too much in each photograph, and they ended up seeming over-loaded with concepts and visual elements. So the second attempt failed too.

After a thorough examination of these images and a review of my approach, I decided to remove a few of the layers that I had embedded in one photograph, and thus minimise the content of each image by focusing on one idea and aesthetic only.

I was mostly drawn to Andy Warhol's approach—especially his portraits of celebrities and other famous figures. The reproduced and reproducible quality of his images served to flatten the identity of the individuals depicted; and adorned by a colorful palette and bare use of decoration like in advertising, his use of a commercial language that at once celebrates and critiques American consumerism was most relevant to the consumption and celebration of the images of veiled and suppressed women.

From this new starting point, my next strategy was to combine two well-known images in the art world. I chose one portrait from Shirin Neshat's famous series *Women of Allah* (1998) and Andy Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe (1962). I decided to replicate the two and combine bits and pieces of each in one image, then add a few other elements like sunglasses and a blond wig to highlight the clichéd method of juxtaposing traditional and modern identities that I discussed in the previous chapter. After making the staged portrait in the studio against the Chroma-Key backdrop, I started adding layers of colour to the image in Photoshop, mimicking the exact aesthetic and colour palette of Warhol's image.

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**Figure 6.5** (left). Andy Warhol (1962), Portrait of Marilyn Monroe [Silkscreen painting]

**Figure 6.6** (right). Shrin Neshat (1993), I am its secret [Photograph and calligraphy]. From the series *Women of Allah*





**Figure 6.7** Hoda Afshar (2013), *Westoxicated #3* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.

This was the first time that I felt the concept and aesthetic were working together. The use of Warhol's sharp and bold colors shifted the negative expression of the veil to something that was challenging the market in which clichéd and stereotyped images of veiled woman circulate.

When the visual language I was looking for was finally refined, I started making more portraits in the studio and used them as a foundation to sculpt and shape the images in postproduction.

The accessories I incorporated in the images were collected from op-shops, costume and antique shops where I would search for inspiration and objects that could directly reference the images I intended to criticise. A wide range of objects were used in my studio photographs, but not all were successful. They were either too simplistic or too busy. The challenge for me was to maintain a minimal and complex aesthetic. So I carefully chose a smaller selection of only nine images that I believed together targeted a wide range of issues concerning the representational politics and marketing of Islamic female identity in the arts.

Finally, as discussed earlier, in conceiving this series I was also thinking critically about the work of artists who use calligraphy and text in their images to communicate meanings with an audience who does not understand the language, but merely sees it as an exotic and decorative element. One of the major factors in the success of Shirin Neshat's work in the West, for example, is the beautiful calligraphy that she uses in her images.

In an interview that Neshat did in 1999 following the major success of her work on the identity of Islamic women, she describes the essential elements of her photographs:

The main question I ask is, what is the experience of being a woman in Islam? I then put my trust in those women's words who have lived and experienced the life of a woman behind the chador. All images concentrate on the body, the chador, and the text. Each time I inscribe a specific woman's writings on the photographs, the work takes a new direction. (Sheybani 1999)

Neshat goes on to describe the importance of the text in her work as it stands in contrast with the suppressed position of the woman in veil. In her first series of images, *Unveiling*, she used poems of Forough Farukhzad, a famous feminist poet. As Neshat puts it, "her poetry was radical, as no other woman before her had ever dared to speak so freely on the subjects of female emotional and sexual desires" (ibid).

So here Neshat's images of covered and concealed women are a form of mourning for the lost ability of a woman to express herself as radically as Farukhzad, who lived before the Islamic revolution and fought for women's freedom. This was Neshat's reaction to seeing Iran years after the revolution happened and facing a different reality of her country (ibid). She then continues to describe the meaning of the text in her second series, *Women of Allah*, in which she "visualizes the personal and public lives of women living under extreme religious commitment" (ibid). Here Neshat's criticism concerns women who express their solidarity with men in rejection of Western cultural imperialism through veiling. The poetry on their bodies is borrowed from Tahereh Saffarzadeh, this time, who "expresses the strong conviction many Iranian women have for Islam. They feel liberated from the previous class structure and certain social constraints by the Islamic revolution" (ibid).

For Neshat, then, the focus of the series in question concerns the concept of martyrdom. She explains: "One finds a strange juxtaposition between femininity and violence. Ultimately, the martyr stands at the intersection of love, politics, and death. She is committing a crime because she loves God and this love entails violence" (ibid). And at the end she concludes: "There is a great deal of self-contradiction in strong and proud women, participating in the revolutionary

process, willing to go to war with rifles across their backs, and yet still endure the laws of the harem” (ibid).

Evidently, Neshat’s work reflects a very personal and subjective view on the plight of Islamic women. However, her generalised statements come across as that of an outsider, and arguably reflect an orientalist and objectifying gaze. She is very critical of the act of veiling, but at the same time fascinated by it, as reflected in its ornate aestheticisation in her works. However, in the West, Neshat’s being Iranian, and so her views on this matter, are seen as reflecting an insider perspective; thus, her commentaries on veiling and on the position of Muslim Iranian women (no matter how subjective) have been embraced by a global audience as the truth of the plight of Islamic women.

The main question that I asked myself in responding to her imagery concerns how the complexity of the individuals’ narratives and the meaning behind the poetry used here (in connection with the relevant images) is destined to be understood by audience that does not understand the language. What can text do as a visual motif when its meaning is hidden? At best, it can only be understood aesthetically and, in the case of Persian calligraphy, a formalist and poetic element beautifying the portrayed misery.

The use of calligraphy and other ornamental Islamic signifiers has a longer tradition in Iranian art, and is one of the most recognised and popular art forms from Iran in the Western art market. In Iran, too, calligraphy was picked up again by a group of leading Iranian artists in the 1960s who formed a movement dubbed “Saqqakhaneh”. The goal of this movement was to counter the direct imitation of Western idioms in Iranian art, and it resulted in a style that was both rooted in local popular culture (both secular and religious) and, in certain cases, inspired by the art of the pre-Islamic era.

Although this was a local movement making art for local audiences, to revive traditional and classical motifs of Iranian art, the work of its artists shortly found its way into global art festivals and biennales, and even today these works continue to break sales records in art auctions such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s (Seaman 2016).

It was crucial for me to address this fact in my work—namely, about the loss of meaning of a written text when it is received by non-local audiences. Hence, my use of Persian calligraphy in *Under Western Eyes* is aimed at communicating this concept. So again it is important to note that my intention was not to criticise an artist who uses calligraphy as a way of expressing her self-identity, cultural heritage and the literature that is close to her heart. Rather, it has been

fascinating for me to see how an audience that is outside the cultural borders of the artist and her language responds to this form of expression.

So I decided to employ text in my work, but in an experimental manner, and to play with the content of the writing: a form of testing and teasing my audience. In the first successful image I created during this iteration of the work—the one in which I combined Neshat's and Warhol's images—I rehashed the lyrics of an old pop song about the singer's love for a next-door neighbor. To reference Neshat's image, I made the text trace a circle shape on the face of the subject, who is holding a gun on her head (referencing at once Warhol's Marilyn Monroe and Neshat's self-portraiture).

### 6.3 Images and installation



**Figure 6.8** Hoda Afshar (2013), *Westoxicated #1* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.9** Hoda Afshar (2014), *Westoxicated #2* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.10** Hoda Afshar (2013), *Westoxicated #4* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.11** Hoda Afshar (2014), *Westoxicated #5* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.12** Hoda Afshar (2014), *Westoxicated #6* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.13** Hoda Afshar (2014), *Westoxicated #7* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.14** Hoda Afshar (2014), *Westoxicated #8* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



**Figure 6.15** Hoda Afshar (2014), *Westoxicated #9* [Digital photograph]. From *Under Western Eyes* series.



## 6.4 *After the Motherland* (2015)

Following the completion of *Under Western Eyes*, I continued to explore some of the same themes through my creative arts research. This led to the creation of another minor work, *After the Motherland*, which similarly addresses questions about the ideological positioning of the female Islamic subject in opposition to that of the ideal(ised) Western subject. The immediate inspiration for this work, however, was a personal experience that I shall briefly describe before introducing the work.

In 2015, I was attending a cultural studies symposium in Melbourne when I was aggressively attacked by a Western feminist who did a performance reenacting her own “liberation” of Afghani and Muslim women. The woman, who spent three months in Afghanistan teaching a workshop on cinema for Afghani women, started her performance by walking into the room in a long black burka and a large bag in her hand. She then asked the audience to stand up, and moved the men to one side of the room and the women to the other side. She continued by taking burkas out of her bag and forcefully insisting audience members place them on their heads. She then began narrating her experiences of being in Afghanistan, while repeating how claustrophobic she was feeling wearing the burka. Throughout the performance, she gradually took off layers of her clothing. When it arrived at a point that she was nearly naked, she stated that she has the freedom to remove the last layer, but chooses not to. As a Western woman, she claimed, she is lucky to have the autonomy to get naked whenever she wants to, while a Muslim woman does not have that freedom. And so she proclaimed it her responsibility, and ours, as free Western women to educate them. At the conclusion of this display, she sang a Western song that she performed on Afghan radio in order to demonstrate what a woman’s freedom *really* looks like.

As she was walking out the room, I asked whether she knows of other narratives of Muslim women who do not share the same outlook on the veil or the burka that they wear. She came up to me with a burka in her hand, held it in my face and yelled at me that I do not have the right to ask that question because I refused to wear it when she insisted earlier. I said that I am an Iranian woman and that I know how it feels to be forced to wear the veil, and that I refuse to partake in this charade because I find it objectionable that an Afghan woman be reduced to this simple performance. Then she—and her husband—attacked *me* for being unsympathetic and oppressive!

What this whole repulsive show demonstrated to me yet again was that the ghost of colonialism is very much still alive, and that the desire of some feminists to provide a voice for the

“suppressed” female subject, and to consume images of her, is just a narcissistic game in which the tolerant, free and open Western subject (the colonial Other) discovers and masters itself through imagining her superior position in relation to the colonised other. Her desire to raise and liberate the voice of the suppressed women of Afghanistan was nothing but an attempt to discover and display her own freedom, merely through imagining an opposing image of herself: the suppressed other.

Once again, I was reminded of the argument that the transnational feminist theorist, Chandra Mohanty, presents in her own essay *Under Western Eyes*. She asks what happens when the assumption of women as an oppressed group is situated in the context of Western feminist writing about Third World women, and replies: Western feminists alone become the true “subjects” of this counter-history, while Third World women never rise above the debilitating generality of their “object” status (1988).

*After the Motherland* was born out of these concerns. But the image that I made was also directly inspired by, and references, *Alma Parens*, or *The Motherland*—a painting by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau. The painting is known to symbolise the colonial history of France and its empire.

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**Figure 6.16** William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1883), *The Motherland* [Oil on canvas]

In the center of this image is a seated mother figure that represents the “Mother France” in a noble pose, offering her breast to the children crawling around her. The figure was initially inspired by Marianne, the Statue of Republic by Léopold Morice (1880) made by the brothers Charles and Léopold Morice, signifying liberty, equality, and fraternity—the values of the French Republic.

This young mother is surrounded by nine children, some crawling around her seated figure, while a few of the children are leaning against her body from different directions and staring at her face enviously. One child is standing next to her while two others are portrayed at the bottom right of the painting in a physical struggle with each other, strongly resembling the figures of the war between France and Mexico in 1864.

I came across this image often throughout my research on postcolonial history. It appeared over and over on many different pages, outside its original context, metaphorically suggesting the mother figure as the imperial superior West who sees herself as the mother of the world, the

motherland, here seated in the position of power, feeding and comforting her subjects who are in dire need of her provision.

To capture the essence of this image, I utilised the same studio methods that I developed earlier in my studio research. This included staging and constructing a scene that resembles and references a familiar image from Western art history, juxtaposing and remixing that image with new meanings and forms, and then exaggerating or romanticising it for the sake of humor, and to make possible the communication of societal issues that affect the same marginal communities to which I belong.

The process of making *After the Motherland* started with the idea of using the same composition seen in William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *The Motherland* so as to directly reference the hierarchical systems of power that this image depicts. The second visual metaphor that I decided to employ was related to the use of the colour white, which is the dominant tone in the image. This was intended firstly to create a serene and sacred scene in reference to the imagined innocence and nativity of Islamic women, and secondly to reference the idea of White power.

In drafting the rest of this theatrical scene, I invited a Melbourne-based artist who is a member of a collective known as *Dirty Feminists* to play the role of the young white mother of the original *The Motherland* (1880) in my staged photograph. To link her portrait to the one in the original painting, I handmade a floral crown that is identical to that worn by the mother figure in *The Motherland*.

Various lighting testing was done prior to the photoshoot to hone the final aesthetic of the work. I finally decided to create an overexposed scene filled with light to create a sense of feigned holiness. Throughout the whole process of preparing and constructing the stage, the experience of watching that performer at the symposium was present in my mind and inspired my approach towards making the final images.

I tried many different compositions and combinations of the naked mother surrounded by a group of women fully covered with the white veil and neqab. The poses of these figures (depicted leaning against the mother, desiring her and dreaming of sharing her freedom) were initially inspired by the original *Motherland* portrait, but also other dramatised gestures common in mythological paintings of the nineteenth century such as *The First Mourning* (1888) by the same artist, or *The Dead Christ Mourned* or 'the Three Maries' (1603) by Annibale Carracci.

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**Figure 6.17** William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1888), The First Mourning [Oil on canvas]

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**Figure 6.18** Annibale Carracci (1603), The Dead Christ Mourned ('the Three Maries') [Oil on canvas]

Among Western feminist artists concerned for the plight of Muslim women, the act of getting naked is often deployed in a show of ersatz resistance and as a symbol of ultimate personal and sexual freedom. This 'sympathetic' gesture, however, simply reproduces the image of Muslim women as oppressed victims waiting to be liberated by their non-Muslim sisters, and thus, unwittingly replicates the same hierarchies that these concerned Western feminists oppose. *After the Motherland* aims to momentarily disrupt this imaginary colonizing of Muslim women's bodies and identities

**Artist statement**  
***After the Motherland* (2015)**



**Figure 6.19** Hoda Afshar (2015), *After the Motherland* #1  
[Digital photograph].



**Figure 6.20** Hoda Afshar (2015), *After the Motherland #2* [Digital photograph].

## 7 In the Exodus, I love you more

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine the final body of work that I produced as part of my creative arts research: *In the Exodus, I love you more* (2014–2016). Though quite different in its style and themes compared to the earlier works discussed (employing as it does an expanded documentary approach and exploring more personal themes), this series represents an important stage in my creative arts research; for while its central theme concerns my changing relationship to my homeland, viewed through the lens of my migration experience and the loss of my father, my very decision to return to making documentary work and the specific approach that I employed were, in part, determined by what I came to see as several critical limitations associated with the previous works and their approaches (this, and the fact that I simply missed the poetic and narrative element that was previously a feature of my practice, since it was these qualities that drew me to art-making in the first place). Most importantly, where the series *In the Exodus, I love you more* does share thematic concerns with the earlier works (related to issues of representation or, more specifically, exploring outsider versus insider perspectives on Iran), it adopts a quite different approach to the former works: one that is not straightforwardly oppositional but, while still critical, is rather focused on communicating positive knowledge. Given then that this stage of my creative arts research reflects my evolving visual communication approaches, I will begin in the following section by presenting a summary of my critical self-reflections on the series *Under Western Eyes* before introducing the final work.

### 7.2 Critical self-reflections

Although I consider *Under Western Eyes* a relatively successful series in terms of visually encoding the themes that I wanted to communicate and respond to, after reflecting on the finished work and its reception, I also came to question some of the strategies that I employed in it.

To begin, some of my Iranian peers predictably criticised me for making this series—that is, for once again making “Iranian” art fashioned specifically for a Western gaze. And though it must be said that this work was never intended for an Iranian audience, nor straightforwardly for a Western audience (since it was only ever intended to serve as a mirror reflecting back the Western gaze), still, it might be criticised (among other things) for adding yet one more layer of accrued meaning to the veil, despite my work and the appearance of the veiled women in it



being intended ironically. (In other words, my work may be subject to the very criticism that I presented in the Chapter 5 in relation to the unstable meaning of such ironic statements.) While this is true, I have also been careful to articulate both visually and in my accompanying statements that this work has nothing at all to do with Muslim women themselves—not even the misconceptions that surround them. That is, the images in the series are not intended to represent or communicate the truth of Muslim or Iranian women at all. What this work presents, rather, are simulacra, or humorous replica of fetishised commodities that circulate within the global art market. And it is precisely here that I think the work has been most successful in terms of realising its aims, since the visual language used is unmistakably rooted in a Western art-historical tradition (Pop Art) which already speaks to the commercialised language of modern art and the reproduction/reproducibility of contemporary images, like products designed for consumption.

Tellingly, though, it is worth observing that this series has proven to be one of the most commercially successful works that I have produced to date, with all the editions of several images already being sold out and only a few remaining of the rest. Whether this is an ironic fact or simply an indication that the idea I was seeking to communicate has been well received, I am not sure. More seriously, though, if the work has achieved this success for precisely those reasons that I set out to criticise in making it, then I would certainly consider this a failure and an indictment of the work.

Another (self-)criticism of this work, and one that is similar to the critique that I developed in Chapter 5, has to do with “the critique of the spectacle”, discussed by Jacques Rancière. In his penetrating work *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Rancière questions the ability of political art that assumes a straight transit between modes of artistic production and their supposed or intended political and social effects. In particular, he is critical of art that seeks to reveal the reality (of domination, exploitation and so on) lying behind “appearances” through strategies such as montage and (Brechtian) distancing. There is no reason, Rancière thinks, that such strategies will be understood (presupposing, as they do, the sort of uncomplicated connection between means and effect as just described), nor that the rupturing of sense, or the particular awareness that they produce (such as an awareness of the omnipotence of the commodity) (Spencer, 2010) will not in fact weaken political efficacy, given that such effects are all bounded by suspicion. My series *Under Western Eyes*, employing as it does a similar strategy, falls squarely within this sort of critique.

This points to a larger question about how an artist of “marginal” cultural background such as myself, engaged in producing art that aims to communicate both local and global concerns to a

non-local audience, should go about this, given that she is destined to find herself pulled in opposing directions, or caught between different competing forces or interests at different times. As a site of cultural translation, that is, the non-Western artist who is engaged in making work that is destined to be read by a Western audience, she must not only contend with the immediate problems of finding ways to speak in a global language about the local, nor yet simply the fact that this global language is still in some ways parochially “owned” by the West, in the sense that Iranian and other artists are still often faced with the dilemma of having “to choose between ‘derivative’ production (never considered as good as the European model) or [displaying]... one’s otherness” (Keshmirshekan 2010, p. 499); in addition, and as I have argued in this exegesis, she also faces the problem that the language she may find herself speaking is, in a very real sense, an imperial one.

So once again, an important question that has emerged for me both before and especially after reflecting on the process of creating this work (*Under Western Eyes*) concerns how I and other artists like me (engaged in making art that seeks to confront the sort of issues to do with representation that I have been discussing) should proceed, if not in this way.

Reflecting on my own practice up until this point, I thus came to realise the problems associated with the strategies I had been using, not only because of the abovementioned limitations but also because the largely negative or “oppositional” approach that I had employed in them reflected a significant departure from the sort of narrative and personal story-telling and communication that I began pursuing through my photographic practice. As such, in the last stage of my creative arts research, I returned to a form of documentary image making that was once again focused on personal and social issues, whilst seeking to avoid some of the problems of representation that I have tried to respond to in the manner described in the preceding chapters.

### 7.3 *In the Exodus, I love you more* (2014-2016)

In 2014, following the death of my father, I decided to return to make work in Iran for the first time since migrating to Australia. The expanded documentary series *In the Exodus, I love you more* came together over several years and was first exhibited in 2016. I consider it an ongoing work.

While the original aim of this series was to document and explore my changing relationship to my homeland Iran in the light of my experience of migration and the loss of my father, the work is also concerned in a more indirect way with communicating the complex social realities and

geography of contemporary Iran. As such, the work represents an important turning point in the development of my creative arts research and wider artistic practice, since it reflects a shift away from the sort of approach that I adopted in the previously discussed works, whilst maintaining a focus—though less direct—on some of the same issues. Most importantly, where the work is concerned with exploring similar issues of representation to those discussed in the previous chapters, the visual approaches that I have used have been shaped, in part, by the critical self-reflections summarised in the preceding section. That is, it was not only my desire to return to making more personal and documentary work that determined the style and approach of *In the Exodus, I love you more*, but also my search for new strategies after realising the limitations of my former approach.

It is important to note that I in fact began my training and career as a documentary photographer in Iran but, after migrating to Australia, I turned to making staged and conceptual images primarily because of my feeling of disconnection to the local culture: I lacked the insider perspective that had previously informed my documentary approach. On the hand, I also stopped making work in or about Iran after migrating because even when I went back, the increasing distance I experienced made me feel unauthorised to make work there too.

However, in 2014, shortly after the passing of my beloved father, I felt the urge to return and make documentary work in Iran again. As well as wanting to reconnect with my home country, partly as a way of remembering my father, my intention too was to explore this particular way of seeing Iran as one who is not an outsider but no longer fully an insider either. After all that I had learnt through my migration and research, I felt there was something new to explore in this perspective. This included my new knowledge about the dominant images of Iran in the West and how I might challenge them through my own lens. The resulting work, then, is a constellation of broken fragments of a reality that is partly personal, and relatively social and political, which is intended to suggest that our lives and experiences of the world are never whole, but rather a mosaic of shifting pieces.

What is most important to note here is that in developing the work, I came to see its personal focus as a means of responding to, and of navigating, many of the same issues that I have described in this and the preceding chapters, including the limitations I discovered in my earlier works and approach. So, for example, similar to my earlier series, one of my concerns in making *In the Exodus, I love you more* was to respond to the dominant representations of Iran that exist in the West: primarily the media images that have tended to circulate widely outside Iran after the Islamic revolution, but also many of the works that have (arguably) been produced in response to these images. This includes both the works of many Western documentary

photographers who have travelled to Iran in recent years and made work celebrating their discovery that the reality is quite different to the dominant representations of Iran (as if having one's ignorance shattered is something to be celebrated), as well as the work of many Iranians themselves who try to present an image of Iran as "like the West", because of an instilled idea that the West is the model of everything good and civilised. (Arguably, the positive reception of these works outside Iran can be explained in terms of the same narcissism that I attempted to critique in *Under Western Eyes* and *After the Motherland*, though differently expressed: here, the positive reception with which these images are greeted perhaps owes to the "realisation" that Iranians are okay because they are *just like us*.)

Rather than attempting to directly challenge these representations, however, my approach in making *In the Exodus, I love you more* simply involved refusing this idea that Iran is a singular reality, and similarly the idea that any single way of describing the complex reality of Iran is even possible. As such, the main visual and communicative strategies I developed through my studio research involved exploring different perspectives that exist in relation to Iran. These include the sort of superficial perspective that an outsider might also share (mainly focused on urban scenes and landscapes) to found images of martyrs killed during the Iran-Iraq war, and, between these, scenes of personal reflection.

Finally, a strong focus of my studio research leading up to the exhibition of this series involved experimenting with installation ideas and the pairing and sequencing of images so as to reflect this narrative dimension of the work. Indeed, this is one of the most notable differences between *In the Exodus, I love you more* and the preceding series.

In summary, the final stages of my creative arts research involved exploring new visual strategies that suggest the possibility of rethinking or redefining the complexities and challenges of representing cultural identity from a more positive, rather than critical perspective, but in a way that tries to incorporate all of the concerns that I have presented in the preceding chapters of this exegesis. Primarily, this involved my returning to an expanded documentary form of photography as well the incorporation of more personal and narrative focus in my work.

## 7.4 Visual inspiration

While it is impossible to list all of the relevant sources of inspiration relevant to this series, I shall mention a few artists whose approaches have served as a point of reference for me in recent years—particularly those artists whose work overlaps with some of the major themes explored in this exegesis.

In general, my greatest influences have tended to be outside of the photography world. I more often find inspiration in literature, theory, and other visual art mediums and movies. For example, the artist who has probably influenced my documentary practice the most is the Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami. I am also very much inspired by the romanticism and poetry of the work of the video artist Bill Viola. In terms of artists whose practice is more squarely focused on communicating ideas related to power-relations and the condition of global exile, however, the following figures have been especially influential for me.

#### 7.4.1 Hossein Valamanesh

Hossein Valamanesh is an Iranian born artist who migrated to Australia after the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1972, and has spent most of his professional career based in Adelaide. Through the use of natural materials such as wood, sand, earth and stone, and often by referring to his Persian culture and heritage, Hossein Valamanesh's work explores the theme of one's relationship to his or her homeland and the significant role of memory in bonding with a new place. Living in self-imposed exile, Valamanesh refuses to become an artist who mourns the harsh reality of exilic life. However, a powerful sense of nostalgia and connection with his native culture is present in most of his artworks. By referring to his memories of the past, Valamanesh explores his present and the links between the two cultures that he simultaneously inhabits.

One of my favorite works of Valamanesh is *Homa* (2000), in which he uses the damaged leaf of a fan palm to create a long braid in the memory of his Iranian grandmother combing and plaiting her long hair. He juxtaposes the long, suspended braid of hair, made from the found palm leaf, with an old photograph of his grandmother in which her hair is largely obscured (Walker 2009).

This work, then, is about childhood memories, but it also speaks to the desire to connect with the past. Valamanesh's habit of using natural materials (usually gathered on his daily walks) is his way of exploring connections to place. Also, the employment of images of local landscapes in his work enables him to create a bond between the memories of the past and the ones in his new country of residence.

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**Figure 7.1** Hossein Valamanesh (1997), *Longing belonging* [Mixed media, direct colour positive photograph, carpet, velvet]

Most of Valamanesh's works are both familiar and unexpected. There is a strong sense of individuality presented in his work, stemming from his ability to portray the imaginative and personal world of his memories without considering to which audience he's making the work for. By that I mean the usual expectations of using the familiar signs and forms of a visual language that is most accessible to the Audience of the host culture. The honesty, uniqueness and poetry of Valamanesh's work alone manage to communicate his stories beyond the limitations of the borders and languages.

In each of these respects, Valamenesh's approach has been a source of inspiration for me in creating the work to be discussed below—i.e., his use of a mosaic-like approach that involves gathering images and objects to explore questions about the changing connection to the past and different places that a migrant experiences.

#### 7.4.2 Mona Hatoum

One of the artists whose practice shares a significant aspect of intellectual resistance with Edward Said is that of Lebanese-born Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, who now lives in London. Like Said, she is also a Palestinian exile, and through her work she seeks to transform the pain of physical and emotional separation from her native land into a form of intellectual

freedom. Hatoum was born in Beirut to Palestinian parents and became an exile in Britain, during a short visit to London, when war broke out in Lebanon in 1975. She attended art schools in London (Byam Shaw School of Art 1975-9, Slade School of Art 1979-81), where her experience of cultural displacement, both as a woman and an Arab national, informed much of her practice (Riggs 1997). Through her creative attempts, Hatoum exposes the nature of power-knowledge networks, similar to Said (Sazzad 2008).

In an interview with Sara Dimond, Hatoum describes her practice as being about the experience of living in the West as a person from the Third World:

My work is about being an outsider, about occupying a marginal position, being excluded, being defined as 'other' or as one of 'them'. I work with black groups in London on shared issues of colonialism, imperialism, racism and stereotyping of people from other cultures... I visualize the big contrast between a privileged space, like the West, and the Third World where there is death, destruction and hunger (cited in Archer, et al., 1997, p. 127).

Hatoum's work, as such, mostly deals with political themes and makes general statements about the relationship between East and West. However, there is a strongly personal dimension to her work as well. For example, she uses her own body and explores her exilic position to create sculptural, conceptual and situational art that simultaneously speaks to these themes. Hatoum captures the notion of homelessness through both lenses, and her art provokes pain, loss and fear through a powerful poetic language.

One of the consistent messages in her work, as well, has to do with the unfamiliarity of familiar objects; she makes us realise that what we usually think we know is often shallow and superficial. Through de-familiarising ordinary objects such as maps, chairs, kitchen utensils, infant cradles and so on, she forces us to see them in a new light. The sense of fear and danger within her pieces is designed to discomfort the audience—to shock and disturb them. But what makes Hatoum's work most striking is the emblematic language she uses an indirect approach towards exploring political issues. That is, she does not directly challenge the Western representational codes of Oriental stereotypes in her art practice, but rather makes phenomenological works that explore such questions from within.

Only a few of Hatoum's works might be considered autobiographical, though one of them is amongst the most well-known and touching pieces she has created. It is a fifteen-minute video piece called 'Measures of Distance' (1988) which comprises several layered elements constructed around the letters that her mother has written to her from Beirut, and a series of slides taken of her mother under the shower. Hatoum uses the letter's Arabic text and moves it across the screen over the slides. Her own voice is heard in the background, reading out the letters aloud in

English, while one can also hear the taped conversations in Arabic between the mother and daughter, in which her mother speaks openly about her feelings, her sexuality and her husband's objections to Hatoum's intimate observation of her mother's naked body (Manchester 2000).

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**Figure 7.2** Mona Hatoum (1988), Still from the video  
*Measures of Distance*

As Hatoum herself describes, it was a conscious decision to take a very personal attitude in this work, to use autobiography as a resource. She notes:

...I always try to keep my own story out of my practice, however; one reason for choosing a personal approach in *Measures of Distance* was because whenever I watched news reports about Lebanon, I was struck by how the Arabs were always shown en masse with mostly hysterical women crying over dead bodies. It is as if people from the Third World are seen as a mass or a herd and not as individuals... In this work I was trying to go against the fixed identity that is usually implied in the stereotype of Arab women as passive, mother as a non sexual being... the work is constructed visually in such a way that every frame speaks of literal closeness and implied distance. (Archer, et al., 1997, pp. 138-39)

So, Hatoum communicates a personal story, but one that is also aimed at challenging Orientalist stereotypes, by revealing a true image of her mother as a woman with desires, feelings and longings in a social context. Here the revelation becomes a mode of resistance.

Feminists, however, have criticised Hatoum for using the naked female body in her work; and she has been accused of being exploitative and fragmenting the body as they do in pornography. However, she has disregarded these accusations as a narrow-minded and literal interpretation of feminist theory, and described her work as “a celebration of the beauty of the opulent body of an aging woman who resembles the Venus of Willendorf—not exactly the standard of beauty we see in the media” (Archer, et al., 1997, p. 141).



I also believe that what fascinates the viewer about ‘Measures of Distance’ is not the exoticness of the hand-written text or the strangeness of the Arabic dialogues. Even if those elements are removed, the piece still stands as a strong work of art that depicts a very close and emotional relationship between a mother and daughter who are separated from each other. As such, the viewer does not require a translator or a decoder of cultural differences to identify the implications of Hatoum’s work. This makes the work comprehensible for a global audience, whilst remaining faithful to her local cultural experiences. She presents the viewer with a different image of an Arab woman to those we have become accustomed to seeing, and one which challenges their stereotyping as suppressed and so on.

#### 7.4.3 Max Pinckers<sup>12</sup>

One of the closest examples of photographic work that I can discuss here as an inspiration behind some of my more recent work including *In the exodus, I love you more* (2014) is the Belgian documentary photographer Max Pinckers. In fact, I came across his work after I started making this series and noticed the similarities between our visual languages and some of the issues that we are raising through our works.

Reading Pinckers’ powerful and engaging images, I am interested not only in the similarities between our respective ways of seeing the world and of constructing images, but also the way in which Pinckers also aims in many of his documentary-narrative series to use “staged” photography in order both to explore the nature of representation and the meaningfulness of the world for us as an image, but more specifically, in order to interrogate the nature of reality as appearance and as appearing—as a stage of appearances—and the plurality of viewpoints that make up our shared reality. But it is easy to misread this second concern (which in Pinckers’ series *The Fourth Wall* (2012) and *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty* (2014), etc, is partially explored through their cinematic language) as a sort of secondary, and perhaps merely aesthetic concern which is meant to point to the image’s blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction—to add an added layer of surreality which is supposed to mirror the fictionalisation of lives and stories that we see projected in and through the cinema, newspapers, television screens and magazines (etc.), and which reenter mediated “reality” as real fictions when living-actors act out the roles they see played out in such scenes.

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<sup>12</sup> I adapted part of this section for a blog post (December 13, 2016) which appeared on the *Der Greif* website: <https://dergreif-online.de/artist-blog/max-pinckers-the-world-as-stage-of-appearances/>

But between these imaginative layers of Pinckers' work—the back-and-forth play between real life and its captured images, and the self-interrogation of the photographic medium as implicated at one and the same time in mediating and in re-creating reality—we can also read in Pinckers' images a playful but serious concern with the self-selecting nature of life as appearance; for the very nature of appearances suggests both what appears, and those beings to whom all appearances appear, and on both sides there is always a choice, conscious or mechanical, that determines both what is shown (or not shown), and what is seen (or unseen); and this is mirrored in both the actor's choosing how to appear and in the audience's choosing what to see—both of which are partially mediated by the circulation of representations (such as stereotypes) that precede us. So, speaking about his series *The Fourth Wall*, Pinckers has noted: “The people in these images become actors by choosing their own roles, which they perform for the camera and its western operator”, while in *Two Kinds of Memory*, Pinckers gets real Japanese actors to act out our own (Westerners') projected fantasies about Japan, with the important foot-note, which Pinckers gives, that these fantasies are in part as well the product of the country's own projected self-image.

In this way, Pinckers does not merely explore the boundaries between truth and fiction, but rather how representations, or reflected images of the world, can actually become part of reality. Thinking about this dialectical process has been fruitful for me in terms of interrogating the nature of (“real”) documentary versus (“fictional”) staged images, which has become a major concern of mine in recent years, at least since I began making a new series of work about my evolving relationship to my home country in 2014, *In the exodus, I love you more*, which I shall introduce in the following section. As I discuss there, one of the questions that I have attempted to visually explore through this series has to do with how my image of Iran (as a cultural insider who has nevertheless spent many years living outside the country) differs from others', including the dominant representations of Iran that circulate in the West.

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**Figure 7.3** Max Pinckers (2014), Untitled [Photograph]. From the series *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty*

## 7.5 Processes and technique

I shot the images in series *In the Exodus, I love you more* on a medium format camera—a Mamyia 7II. I started photography in the dark room in 2002, and for the first five-or-so years of my practice I only shot on film (analogue photography). I shifted into digital photography for nearly eight years, but I felt the urge to get back to analogue again for this specific project. It was a conscious decision, as I tend to feel closer to the subject matter when I make pictures on an analogue camera. This is for completely internal and intuitive reasons. Making images of Iran after eight years was and still is a very emotional process for me. Taking photos on an analogue camera means that I have to wait before seeing the photos after I return to Australia to process, develop and scan the films so the images appear. It is a magical process to me, and one that made me fall in love with photography in the first place. And it is also aligned with the themes I explore in this series, about presence and absence of the image, and its visibility and invisibility.

*In the Exodus, I love you more* started with a larger concept, a story or feeling in mind that I was trying to capture, and my choice of image reflected that. Unlike my previous series examined in this exegesis, I began taking photographs without a clear destination, and without any expectation. I was patiently waiting to learn the language of that place again and its history—to learn how to converse with it, and through conversing discover what I wanted to share.

After capturing, developing and making a selection of the images, I thought of each scene as in dialogue with the rest, and depending on the visual language that I used for it, I set up the narrative differently. For example, one of the sort of underlying themes in the series concerns the false representation of Iran and its multi-layered reality, as I have said, or the idea that our experience can relate to both the surface and depth of things. So I adopted a visual language in this series of images that relates to both aspects: to what is both present and absent in our expectations, and to the hidden depth in the surface of things.

For making this narrative based series, I traveled extensively to various places around Iran—both cities and villages that I had been to and others that I had never visited before. I took photos of the diverse landscape of Iran, portraits of people, including my close family and relatives as well as complete strangers, faces that I felt drawn to, ones that seem to hold silent stories, pain, and secrets. Urban landscapes, abstract images, animals, faded murals and decaying posters, incorporated natural elements such as mist and fog, soil, dust and water are interspersed with these portraits to create both narrative links and ruptures. The aim of doing so is to create the possibility for multiple narratives to emerge, and so to suggest the idea that “my” images of Iran reflect both my own personal experiences, memories, longings and so on, as well

as the wider history and geography of Iran which is part of we Iranians' collective experience and memories.

## 7.6 Images (selection)

*In the Exodus, I love you more* is an ongoing photographic series that I began in 2014. It is a record of my changing vision of, and relationship to, my homeland, Iran: a relationship that has been shaped by my having been away, by that distance that increases the nearness of all the things to which memory clings, and which renders the familiar... strange, and veiled. It is an attempt to embrace that distance and to turn it into a kind of seeing. To let what is both there and not there shine through the surface. To let the surface speak. It is an attempt to explore the interplay of presence and absence in the history of Iran and in Iranians' lives, and to discover the truth that lies there in their never-ending meeting, in-between.

*In the Exodus, I love you more* (2016)  
Hoda Afshar



**Figure 7.4** Hoda Afshar (2016), Block [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.5** Hoda Afshar (2016), Blank [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.6** Hoda Afshar (2016), Scene [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.





**Figure 7.7** Hoda Afshar (2016), Open [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.8** Hoda Afshar (2014), Lines [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.9** Hoda Afshar (2014), Untitled [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.10** Hoda Afshar (2014), Grace [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.





**Figure 7.11** Hoda Afshar (2014), Touch [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.12** Hoda Afshar (2014), Portrait #3 [Scanned analogue photograph].  
From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.





**Figure 7.13** Hoda Afshar (2016), Portrait #7 [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.14** Hoda Afshar (2016), Portrait #4 [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.





**Figure 7.15** Hoda Afshar (2015), Portrait #6 [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.16** Hoda Afshar (2015), Sidereal [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.17** Hoda Afshar (2016), Lit #1 [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



**Figure 7.18** Hoda Afshar (2014), Fold [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.



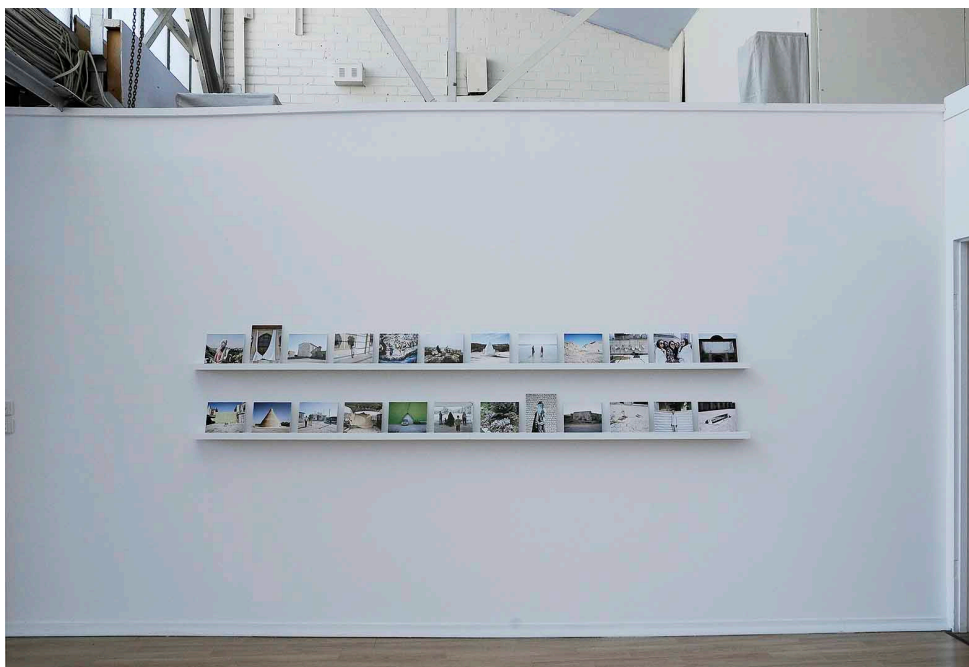


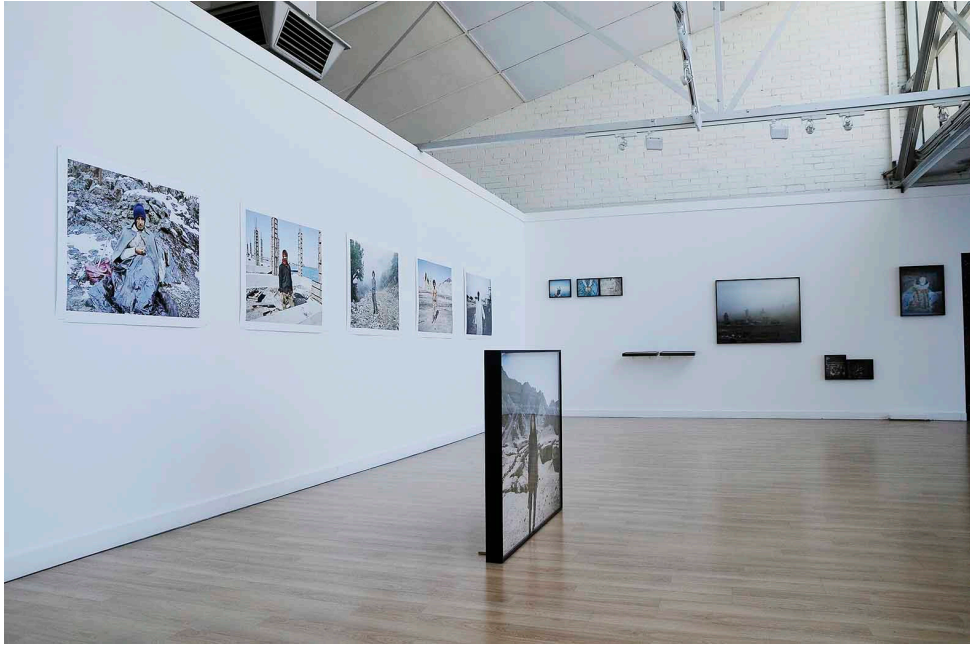
**Figure 7.19** Hoda Afshar (2014), *Twofold* [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.

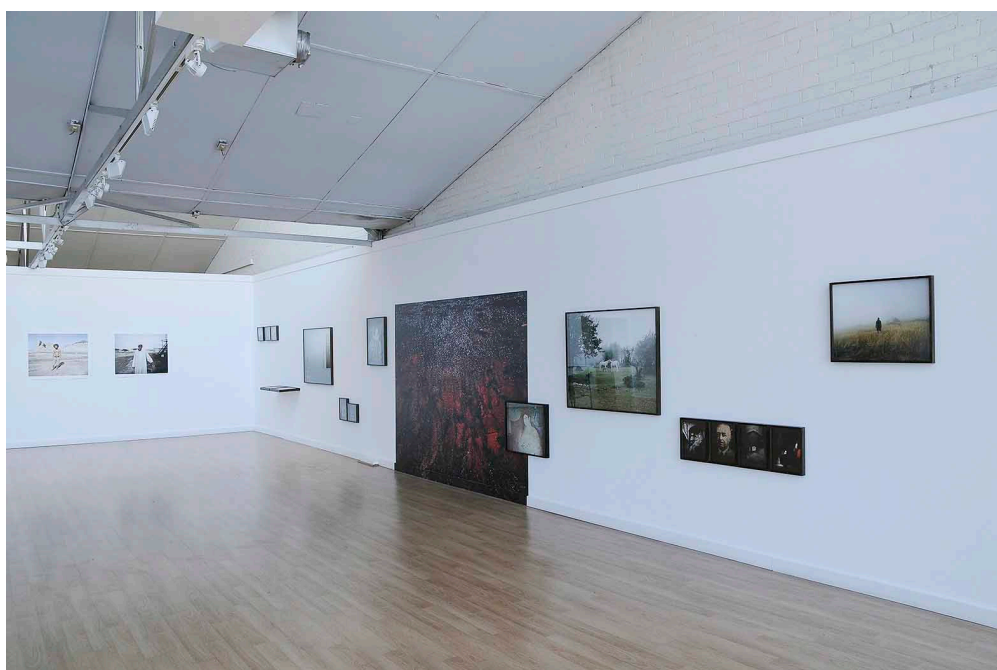
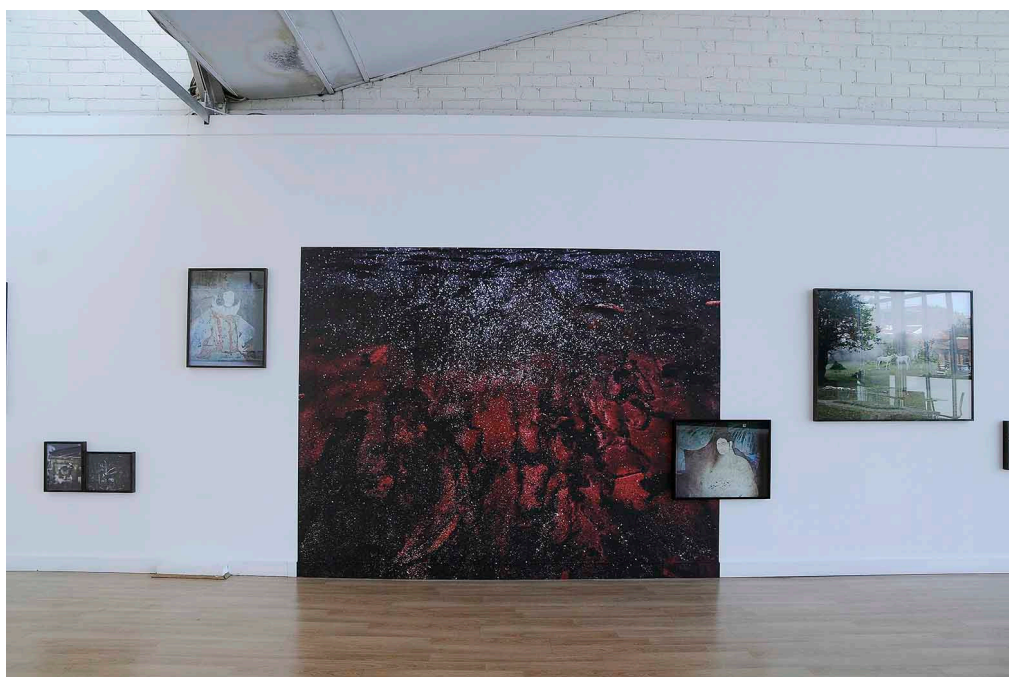


**Figure 7.20** Hoda Afshar (2016), *Turn* [Scanned analogue photograph]. From the series *In the Exodus, I Love You More*.

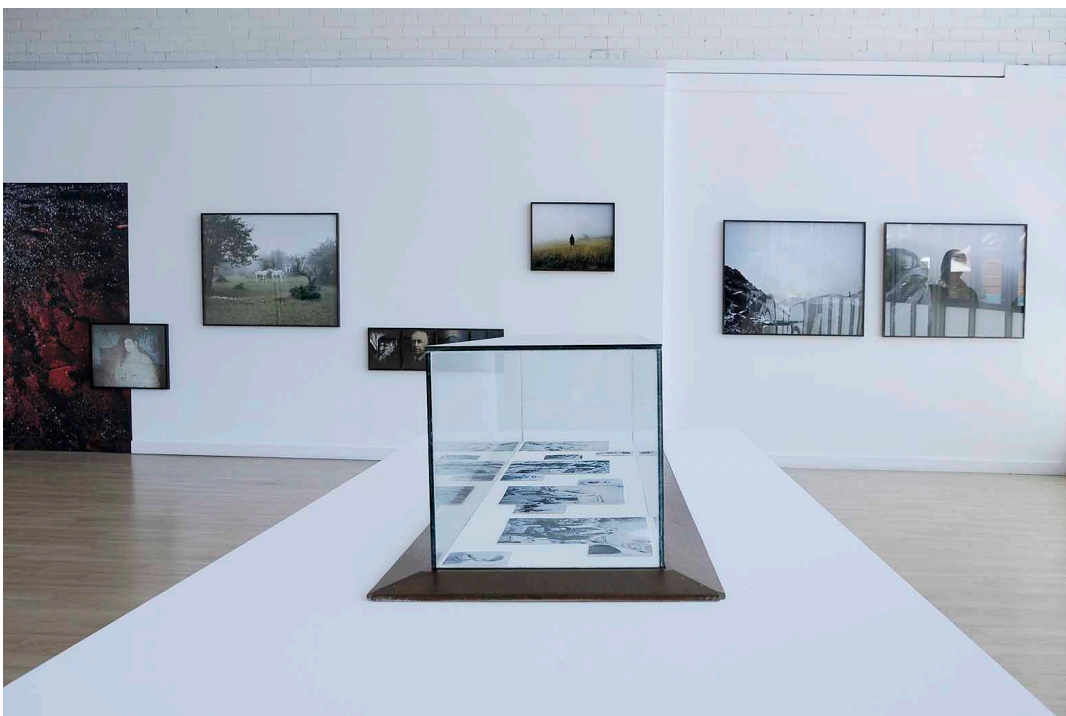
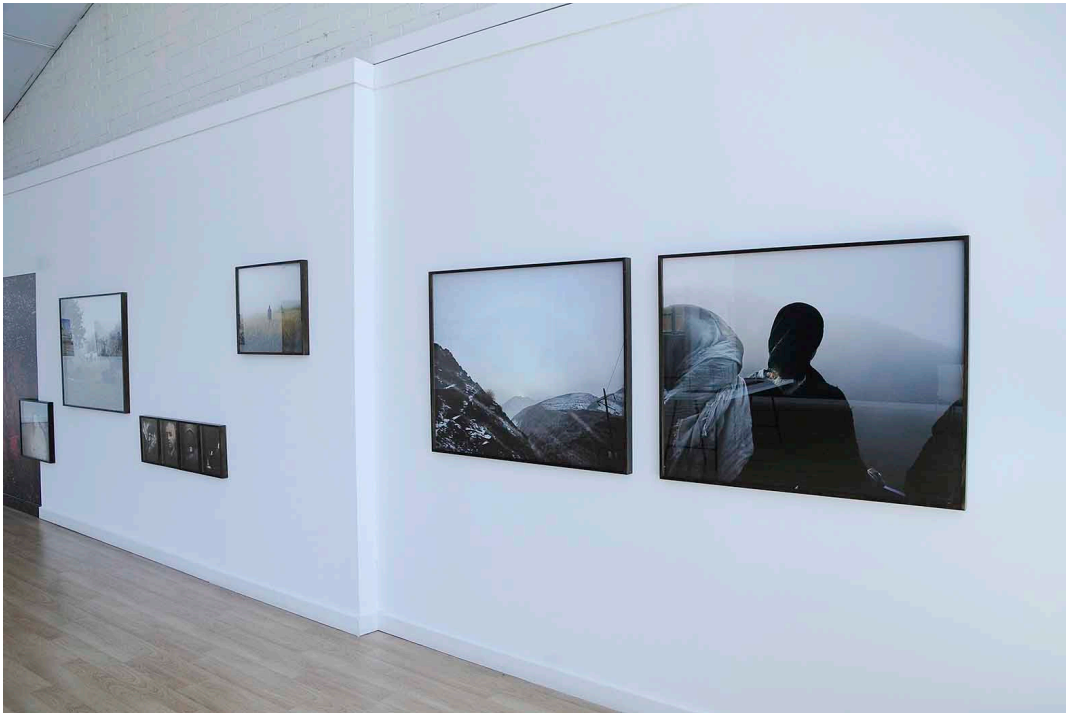
## 7.7 Installation shots











## 8 Conclusion

In this chapter I shall conclude by reviewing the main aims of this exegesis and its contribution to the field.

The main research question that I have sought to address through my creative arts research concerns how problems of identity and representation shape the experience of migrants of non-Western background living in the West, and also what visual-art strategies might be used in order to best communicate and respond to these problems and experiences. To answer this question, I engaged in extensive scholarly research, primarily in the field of postcolonial theory, alongside extensive studio research (involving both experimentation and engagement with art works produced within a similar visual art context) to test different approaches and ways of producing knowledge about the experience of migration and related issues to do with cultural representation. Hence, in this exegesis, I have presented a detailed discussion and evaluation of specific visual strategies and artworks that I developed during my PhD candidature as a means of exploring these problems within my own specific historical and visual-arts context. Above all, this work is intended to speak to and with other non-Western subjects, like myself, who are either living in the West or under its shadow, while also exploring the position of artists of similar background in the contemporary global art scene and the ways in which certain social, economic, political, cultural and other factors combine to influence both the production and reception of their work.

Broadly, then, this exegesis provides insights into, and concrete knowledge concerning, the unique position of non-Western art(ists) today (offered from the “insider” point of view of a non-Western artist herself), and thus contributes to current debates in cultural studies and related disciplines concerning the significance of marginal and hybrid art in an increasingly cosmopolitan and multi-cultural global environment and about the meaning and possibility of art-making today—particularly in the West—in an epoch supposedly characterised by its multicultural openness and cosmopolitan worldliness. Furthermore, the artworks that I have produced as part of completing this research are presented as examples of creative arts research responding to contemporary issues and engaging with current lines of thinking in various theoretical fields.

More specifically, as indicated in Chapter 1, the overlapping questions addressed in this exegesis (and through the visual artworks presented in it) concern the particular situation of a non-Western artist who is living in the West, and the double bind that she often finds herself in:

neither fully accepted or understood by her new community nor the community that she remains attached to but has left behind, she is often encouraged to engage in a style of art-making and to discuss specific themes in a language that reflects her “dual ontology”. This duality, that is, which is already a feature of her experience of dislocation, is redoubled in her attempts to communicate elements of her cultural and historical experience both in a new language and for a new audience, but also in a way that often involves having to work against the pre-existing notions about her cultural identity. That is, she must struggle to free the particular content of her artwork from the prison of those pre- or mis-conceptions that already surround her, or what an audience already “knows” about her, on the basis of her cultural identity alone. And while, it must be said, this is obviously a feature of the politics of representation more generally, for an artist it can feel especially stifling, since it involves introducing a degree of reflexivity or self-consciousness into her creative practice that tends to dilute her other aims. Thus, my own experiences of cultural prejudice led me to make an “ironic” work—*Under Western Eyes*—about audience expectation and my situation as an artist caught up in the Western politics of representation, even though my earlier documentary practice had been focused on capturing local and personal stories.

As such, some of the specific findings of this exegesis have to do with the tendency often seen in cultural studies and related disciplines to celebrate marginality and cultural translation as privileged states of being because of the bi-cultural knowledge they produce. And the emphasis here has to be placed on the word “produced”, since—to echo a point that is often made about post-colonial literary production—the celebration of this knowledge seems to emanate more from the centre than the margins. The question has to be asked, in other words, whether the celebration of this condition, and of those artworks that speak to it, does not in fact represent yet another justification for the forces that produce dislocation, cultural disintegration or rupture and so on, by way of enthusiasm towards the condition that it gives rise to. To put the point slightly differently, while the latest efforts to give a new voice to othered and marginal subjects is certainly welcome, we must be on guard against intellectual and curatorial strategies that celebrate this condition merely as an aesthetic phenomenon, as it were, or promote artists selectively on the basis of their opposition to hegemonic discourses, at the very same time that they reproduce them.

By way of example: we arguably can see such a tendency at play in the field of post-colonial literary production, whereby the appearance of a select few works (either written or translated into one or another imperial language: usually English) is celebrated, and involves recognition and other rewards for the few who make it to the centre. But here too, it is the West that still

benefits most—not only economically, or insofar as these exotic works enrich a market eager for culturally different works, but also ideologically, since it allows the West to celebrate its own openness to cultural difference, its role in liberating these local and marginal producers either from their parochial obscurity or the legacies of colonial oppression. And the crucial point here is that both the process of translation, and the processes of selecting which works will arrive on the scene (and thus come to be seen as authentic and representative examples of local literary production), are or may turn out to be hegemonic to the extent that the language and selection criteria are, as it were, imposed by the West based on its own preferences. For here again the risk is that the latter will simply reflect what the West already knows or desires.

Again, it should be pointed out that this is a feature of translation or communication between cultures in general—that is, of cultural exchange in both directions. But as this exegesis shows, there is an important difference here that concerns the position of the non-Western actor vis-à-vis the knowledge produced in the West more generally; for since it is she that tends to be fluent in one or another of the imperial languages of the West as well as her own, not to mention that she has grown up with the knowledge produced in the West (whether through its mass export, or one or another form of imperial contact, including globalisation, for centuries), it is she who acts as translator, and thus is primarily responsible for producing this celebrated bi-cultural knowledge that is supposed to characterize the coming borderless future.

But if, or to the extent that, this process is one-sided, the question that this exegesis provides a partial answer to is: How should the non-Western artist living in the West or making artwork for a non-local audience respond to this situation? What strategies might she pursue in order to avoid her art becoming entangled in, or endlessly responding to, the politics of representation, or in some other way being reduced to pre-existing knowledge structures? Must she always translate, and thus speak another's language; or can she pursue strategies that promote reading and genuine dialogue, meaning dialogue that leads to genuinely new knowledge?

While this exegesis makes no claim to have fully explored or answered these questions, perhaps its most significant contribution here can be seen in the developmental arc of the visual works presented in it: after developing several major bodies of work that sought in some way to communicate and respond to specific issues related to my experience as a non-Western migrant living in the West I found that, however successful these works were in terms of their visually encoding certain issues (mostly related to the politics of identity and representation), the visual strategies that I developed seemed just as much to reinforce the very image and to reproduce precisely that knowledge that I was attempting critique. Thus, the last phase of my creative arts research and visual exploration involved returning to a style and approach to

image-making that is at once more modest and personal, but also, perhaps, more able to produce critical knowledge for that very reason: rather than attempting to unveil total systems of knowledge, it simply invites the viewer look patiently and quietly: to see the world in fragments, and through a lens that is not his own.

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